



Bill
The Bachelor
Dennis Mackail

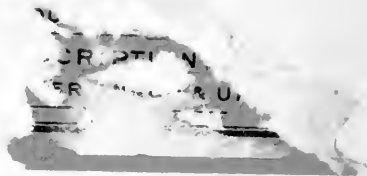


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BILL THE BACHELOR

RECENT FICTION.

CAPTIVITY.

By LEONORA EYLES.

THE HOLY TREE.

By GERALD O'DONOVAN.

BRUSHWOOD.

By KATHLEEN M. BARROW.

THE GREAT QUEST.

By C. BOARDMAN HAWES.

CAREER.

By DOROTHY KENNARD.

JADE AND OTHER STORIES.

By HUGH WILEY.

GINGER & CO.

By G. F. BRADBY.

I WALKED IN ARDEN.

By JACK CRAWFORD.

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

BILL THE BACHELOR

By
DENIS MACKAIL

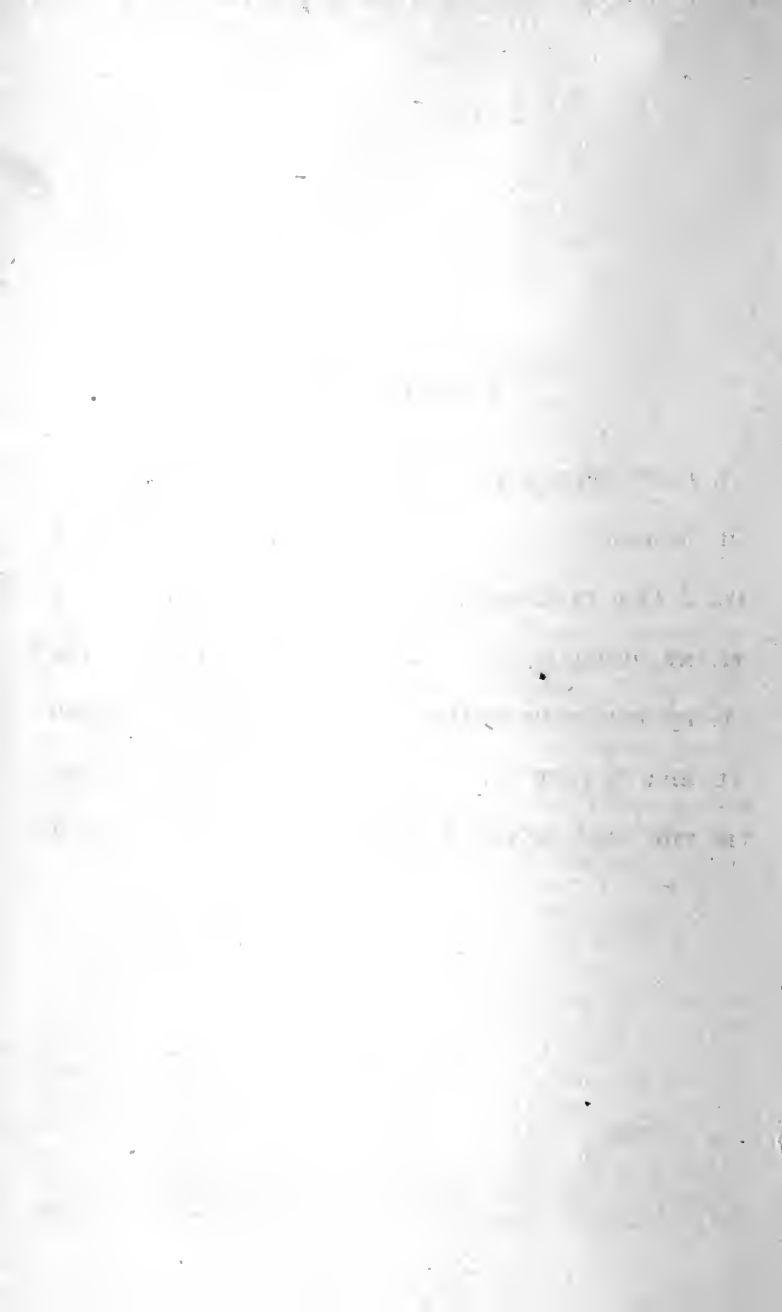
Author of
"What Next?" "Romance to the Rescue," etc.



London · William Heinemann

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BILL THE BACHELOR

I

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE RIGHT-HAND MAN

1

THAT little star down there, towards which we are swooping through space, grows larger and nearer every moment. From the pin-point which it was when we first saw it, it has become an orange ; from an orange, a football ; and as it continues to expand, we now seem to detect, though faintly at first through the drifting patches of vapour, dim outlines and blotches of light and shade irregularly marking its surface. Still the circle grows and grows in size. Already, so rapidly are we approaching, it fills nearly a third of the visible firmament ; now half ; now three-quarters ; and then, as the last surrounding rim of sky is swallowed up by the ever-increasing mass, with a sudden and, to us, almost physical shock, the gibbous hemisphere seems to turn to a vast, circular bowl, whose steep sides surround us in every direction. Unchecked we hold our course towards the vortex of this gigantic pit, whose walls, however, seem now to be sinking with us as we descend, and at last we are able to catch a glimpse, far beneath, of two islands set at the edge of a great ocean.

It is towards the larger of these that we are apparently speeding, and as we draw nearer still, patches of faint colour are seen spread over it, which gradually take form as moor, or forest, or downland. But immediately below us there is no colour ; only an immense, smoky mass, veined in every direction with cracks and crevices of a darker or dirtier grey. Across the centre of this

desolate tract there wanders a paler, but still almost colourless river, and it is the sight of the numerous bridges which seem to span its muddy flow which now suggests the thought that what we are approaching is not, as had at first appeared, the scene of some huge and still smouldering volcanic upheaval, some desert of cooling and cracking lava, but a city, built and lived in by intelligent beings.

The next moment a distant, muffled roar comes snarling up to us from below, and from this instant there can no longer be any doubt. Every second fresh evidence reaches our eyes and ears. The crevices and cracks are seen to be full of rapidly-moving vehicles, and it is from the traffic of these that the sound which we have heard chiefly arises. That staggering hoot came from one of the ships' syrens over there, where the river and its adjoining docks are crowded with great vessels, taking on and discharging their cargoes; and a little later we suddenly see, scattered everywhere, the crowds of minute black figures at whose bidding this extraordinary settlement has arisen. |

Smaller and smaller becomes our field of vision, the closer we draw to the surface of the planet, and at last we are actually plunging into one of the dark fissures which run in every direction through this vast and amorphous conglomeration of buildings.

And at the very bottom of this ravine, speeding along in his big, black limousine, we come on Thomas Grahame, second Baron Longwood, and Mr. J. H. Tidman, his private secretary, both of them now on their way to a board-meeting.

Lord Longwood, whom you may distinguish by his cigar, and the fact that he is leaning back in his seat, may possibly fail at the first glance to satisfy your requirements either as aristocrat or as business magnate. A pleasant-looking, unassuming, elderly man, the only characteristic of which we are at the moment able to take definite hold is the puzzled blink with which he surveys the world in general and the London traffic in particular. Sometimes he frowns a little; the frown of

a man who is constantly reminding himself of, and as constantly forgetting, his own importance. Perhaps we feel slightly puzzled also, but the truth is that the second Lord Longwood is, paradoxically enough, a business magnate by heredity and an aristocrat only by recently-acquired training. An unusual, but, after all, not a wholly exceptional type.

The name Grahame suggests Scotland, but as a matter of fact old Andrew Grahame, who supplied both the title and the position which are now in the care of his son, was something much more terrible and efficient than a mere Scot; for although of Scottish ancestry he had been brought up in Yorkshire, and the result of this mixture provided all and more than one might have feared.

The preliminary stages in this remarkable career are now lost, probably for ever, in an obscurity which the first Lord Longwood himself never did anything to lighten. But rumour is probably not far out when it credits him with having begun as something in the nature of a half-timer. Relying as we do on outside evidence, we must regretfully skip something like thirty-five years of the obstinate, heroic, and entirely selfish struggles in which his early days were spent, before we reach the first definite fact, his appearance, a widower with an only son, as owner of the Grahame and Betteredge Mills, situated on the outskirts of Huddersfield. But since by this time there was certainly no Betteredge attached to his person, we may be right in assuming that the stepping-stones on which he had risen out of the unknown were not wholly mineral in their constitution.

Ten years later he controlled a group of textile factories dotted about the West Riding, and for another ten years still his presence remained to inspire fear and admiration within a radius of twenty-five miles round Bradford. Then, as if to notify him that even Yorkshire manufacturers are mortal, the gods intervened and sent him his first bad attack of asthma. But even here his luck was not altogether out. Although he yielded to the doctors' advice and came to live in the south, he was

able to turn his business into a limited liability company on such terms as he could never have obtained but for the contracts which the South African war had just brought to him. He left his son in nominal charge in the north, and, discovering to his delight the overpowering effect which his reputation and accent had on the weak-minded southerners, he began dabbling, and dabbling with success, in other industries. His name appeared on the directorates of steel and shipping companies. Occasionally industrial disputes would draw him back to the West Riding, where his fame, his appearance, and the double coronas which he would carelessly offer to the trade union leaders never failed in their effect. But for the most part he moved between Hare Hall, the house which he had taken in Kent, and his office in Great St. Jude's in the City of London. In 1906 he was made a baronet, as to the reasons for which honour, students of English history may make their own deductions.

The mills of God, and of Sir Andrew Grahame, continued their usual work, and in due course there arrived the European war. The original Grahame and Betteredge factory had always specialised in the construction of a material known as shalloon. This fabric, which is said to derive its name from the town of Châlons-sur-Marne, is, as you are probably aware, a kind of light serge, principally used for linings or for the rather flimsy requirements of women's tailors. If you were shown a piece of it, you might admire its potentialities as the foundation of a tennis skirt, but you would hardly expect that it would be in very great demand by the army in the field. This, however, is exactly where you would, unless you were an insufferably well-informed person, be wrong. It is true that the stuff is too light to be used for uniforms, too porous for bell-tents, too loosely-woven for parachutes, too thin and elastic for web-equipment and too rough even for hospital shirts. But, and especially when made to the government specification, it possesses one peculiar property. It burns evenly and quickly, and it leaves a minimum of

ash. That is why it was utilised to contain the propellant charge of every gun of the B.L. or (as we might say) howitzer type which was fired during the four years and three months of the war.

I am not going to try and say how many charges were disposed of in this manner over this period, or in how many places (including Châlons-sur-Marne) this indispensable textile was employed. Nor shall I trouble anyone by stating how many inches or feet were consumed on each occasion. The figures, even if I knew what they were, would make no more impression on you than does the size of the national debt. But their significance is no less real.

In the fullness of time the Government, represented by Mr. S. C. Withers (afterwards Sir Sidney Withers, K.B.E.), signed an Order requisitioning the whole output of the Grahame and Betteredge mills. Chartered accountants were conjured up from their dens, and, having done mysterious and magical things with the symbols of their trade, presently emerged to announce what would, in their opinion, be a reasonable rate of profit to allow Sir Andrew Grahame and his associates for the services which they were rendering their country. As a matter of fact, the associates were by now very few, for Sir Andrew had amused himself during the period of keenest German competition before the war by buying up the depreciated shares in his own mills. The business was once more sufficiently his own, therefore, and steel and shipping were in a sufficiently healthy condition, for him to yield to a temptation which sooner or later always besets these hard-headed northerners; the temptation to surprise people.

He sent a holograph communication to the War Office, offering to supply his goods at a still lower rate than that which the experts had recommended, and began preparing himself for the storm of admiration and disgust which this action would arouse in the respective minds of the public and his fellow-manufacturers.

But with the situation which thus arose, the War Office found themselves unable to deal. In vain was

the Record Office searched for a precedent which might govern their reply to this extraordinary offer, and after a delay of three weeks, Mr. P. F. Maunder (afterwards Sir Peter Maunder, K.B.E.) wrote a dignified letter to Sir Andrew in which he pointed out that in view of all the circumstances attendant on the general conditions to which the present situation tended to give rise, and after the most careful consideration of the whole matter by the War Department, and after special reference to and consultation with the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury, he was directed to express regret that the Department found itself unable to take advantage of the suggestion which Sir Andrew Grahame had been good enough to lay before it. He was instructed to add, however, that a special note had been made of the offer in question, and if at any future time the Department should find itself in a position to give the matter additional consideration, a further communication would be addressed to Sir Andrew Grahame; and he was Sir Andrew Grahame's obedient servant, P. F. Maunder, Deputy Assistant Director of Statistical Production.

And so once again Sir Andrew began going north. Though he was making money more rapidly and on a larger scale than he had ever done in his life, he was also working pretty hard for it. At Huddersfield he was giving personal attention to the enlargement of his mills, standing cigars to the labour leaders when they began talking about profit-sharing; standing cigars to the recruiting authorities when they called up his skilled workers by mistake; exchanging cigars with the heads of the Textile branch of the War Office at Bradford. At least once a week he would take the train south to look after his other businesses, to argue with the officials responsible for inspecting and paying for his shalloons, and to sit on one or more of the innumerable advisory committees with which the Government was filling all the hotels in London.

Finally, although he was well over seventy now, the spirit of this curious period, which destroyed the young and rejuvenated the old, so far exerted its influence on

him that he suddenly acquired a pair of plus-four knickerbockers and appeared, clothed in this raiment, in the Prime Minister's retinue at Walton Heath. Once again students of English history will have foreseen the inevitable consequence of these activities. In the New Year's Honours list of 1918, it was announced that His Majesty had been graciously pleased to confer upon Sir Andrew Grahame, Bart., a Barony of the United Kingdom. A few days later a paragraph appeared in the Press, stating that the new peer had decided to take his title from the district which had seen the foundation of his fortunes, and as Lord Longwood of Longwood in the West Riding of Yorkshire he was for the remainder of his earthly existence known.

If we look round to-day at the members of the aristocracy which was produced by the Great War, we find that in practically every case these heroes of the hour of their country's need have allowed themselves (shall we say like Cincinnatus ?) to relapse into comparative obscurity. How far this has been intentional on their part it might be unwise to enquire. One of the tiresome things about a war (as Colonel Baxter, of whom I shall have more to say later, could tell you) is the way in which the public, in its natural haste to forget what it found an extremely unpleasant experience, sweeps also into oblivion those who seemed but a few months before to have secured practically freehold niches in the Temple of Fame. Even more disheartening than this, after this particular war the public for a time showed serious signs of examining the pedestals in these niches, with the clear and critical intention of ascertaining to what extent they might be made of gold, and how much of that gold it had itself contributed. Fortunately or otherwise, in the drifting currents of the years immediately following the armistice, this determination became weakened, and eventually to a large extent disappeared. But its existence at one time may possibly help to account for the resignation with which so many of these great men returned to their ploughs.

In the case of the first Baron Longwood, all this must

remain a matter for speculation. It seems hard to believe that he would ever have been content with any curtailment of his power, however indifferent he may have been to its attendant publicity. But the problem was never placed before him. Once more, and for the last time in his life, he got ahead of all his rivals, for he succumbed to an attack of asthma on the morning of the eleventh of November in the same year which had brought him his highest public honour, and his present whereabouts and opinions must consequently remain as obscure as those of his obscure beginning.

Authenticated cases are by no means lacking where sons, whose existence has been carried on under the constant eclipse of their father's personality, have yet, when the shadow has at length been removed, astonished the world by coming out with all sorts of unsuspected qualities, and have even, in the limited time at their disposal, contrived to flare up with a belated brilliance of their own. But with the heir to the title and possessions of the first Lord Longwood, nothing of this sort occurred. For too many years had he fetched and carried and lived where he hadn't wanted to live and done what he hadn't wanted to do, for any ambitions to survive other than the simple ambition to be left alone. And yet he couldn't be left quite alone. He was too rich for that. Look at him now as he frowns helplessly at his cigar, which, because it is his cigar, has burnt all up one side and is scattering huge flakes of ash over his knees. He doesn't want to go to that board-meeting. He would be far happier pottering round the garden at Hare Hall. But it never occurs to him not to go. Mr. Tidman, who was his father's private secretary for the last fifteen years of his life, has booked the appointment in his engagement book, has ordered the car to be at the front door at ten o'clock, and has arranged in the despatch case which he is now holding on his lap, as he sits bolt upright on the edge of the seat, the correct papers for this particular meeting, together with a memorandum of the correct observations which his employer is to make on them. He has always

done this, and, as far as can be seen, he always will.

And don't imagine that at the board-meeting itself Lord Longwood is going to disgrace himself by any exhibition of inefficiency, even if he does have to be reminded, as they slow up for a block in the traffic, that it is Harraways' (Leicester) Limited at whose direction he is to assist to-day, and not, as he had apparently imagined, at that of the Gwddryn Colliery Company. Whichever it had been, he would have brought the same cautious and conservative mind to its deliberations, and this, backed by the size of his financial interest in both concerns, would have ensured that whatever opinion he might choose to give would receive the most favourable consideration from his fellow-directors; and that if he preferred to give no opinion at all, it would but add to his inherited reputation for having more in him than appears on the surface.

Oh, yes, he is a good enough capitalist in practice; he could hardly have worked under his father for all those years and be otherwise. But you won't find the fearlessness and the independence and the initiative which distinguished his terrifying old parent. Perhaps they have skipped a generation, for such characteristics very often do. We may go down to Hare Hall later on and look into this.

Not that there is, or ever will be, a third Lord Longwood, to add confusion to this narrative. The founder of the house had, in hoping to achieve this end, met with one of his few defeats. For although certain financial operations entered into with the impoverished Earl of Tadcaster, and certain threats and instructions issued to his son, had, now nearly thirty years ago, brought about the desired union between this son and the Earl's only daughter; and although everything seemed thus in train for the perpetuation of the dynasty on the most approved lines, Fate and physiology had intervened. Lady Alice Grahame had after considerable delay given birth to a daughter, and in such circumstances that it was clear that this first effort must also be her last.

And after two more years of suffering, she died, leaving her husband, to his father's horror, an inconsolable widower. In vain were the pages of Debrett fluttered before young Mr. Grahame's eyes. In the six years of his marriage he had fallen more and more deeply in love with his wife, and he, who had never before withstood a single wish that his father had expressed, now took his stand behind these intangible defences and, for the first and last time, uttered his defiance. Never, in any circumstances or under any conditions, would he marry again.

What use to threaten him with disinheritance? Old Andrew Grahame recognised determination when he saw it. He dropped the subject, hoping perhaps that time might succeed where he had failed, and contented himself with exercising his authority where it still existed, with keeping his son's otherwise dutiful nose to the grindstone, and with reducing his allowance. And young Mr. Grahame grew gradually older and continued to do everything, except this one thing, that he was told. And if he sometimes wished that he were some one else's son, and became a little quieter, and blinked a little oftener every year, what of that? Wasn't he one day going to be a millionaire?

The big limousine had now reached its final objective, Messrs. Harraways' registered offices in Wood Street, and already, as the chauffeur gave his last tug to the handbrake and switched off the engine, Messrs. Harraways' doorkeeper came dashing across the pavement and, with a semi-military obeisance, assisted with the extraction of Lord Longwood and his secretary.

"Thank you, Jones," said Lord Longwood; and Jones, whose name was Robinson, but who drew his pay for being called anything that any of the directors chose, again touched his peaked cap.

"Got the papers, eh?" added his lordship, turning to Mr. Tidman.

Mr. Tidman replied by thrusting a bundle of documents into his employer's hands.

"Perhaps you'd better wait, just in case I want anything," said Lord Longwood, as they reached the entrance hall.

"Certainly," answered Mr. Tidman; and there was nothing in his expression to show that he had made the same reply to the same suggestion before every meeting which the two of them had ever attended.

So Lord Longwood got into the lift and was carried up to the board-room, and Mr. Tidman, as had been his custom for countless years, strolled along to the manager's office.

For once Mr. Sanderson was not alone. As Mr. Tidman entered his room, an enormous young man got up from a chair in the corner and stood shuffling awkwardly like a nervous elephant, as if waiting to be told whether to sit down again or to clear out.

"Hullo, Tidman," said Mr. Sanderson. "Come along in. You haven't met my son, have you? He's home on a holiday from Canada."

"How do you do?" said Mr. Tidman.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Mr. Sanderson's gigantic son, and seizing the private secretary's hand, he subjected it to a sudden and forcible pressure of approximately five tons to the square inch.

"Don't go away, Bob," continued Mr. Sanderson. "Mr. Tidman has only come in for a chat. That's right, isn't it, Tidman?"

"That's right," said Mr. Tidman, gazing anxiously at his injured hand.

"Bob was telling me," went on Mr. Sanderson, who, like all successful managers of commercial houses, had never yet been detected in the act of doing any work, "about how he spent his last holiday out in the west."

"Oh?" said Mr. Tidman politely.

"Go on, Bob," said Mr. Sanderson.

And Bob went on.

About twenty minutes later the directors sent down word that they would like to see the manager.

"Don't run away," said Mr. Sanderson, addressing his

son and his visitor ; " I'll be down in a few minutes, I expect."

But his expectations were falsified. It was half an hour before the directors had done with him, and when at length he returned to his own room, it was empty.

He put his head out of the door again

" Hi ! Robinson ! " he shouted.

" Sir ? "

" Did you see my son going out ? "

" Yes, sir. He went out with Mr. Tidman about ten minutes ago."

" Oh. Thanks."

Mr. Sanderson closed his door again, and disappears from the story for good.

But the extraordinary, the unaccountable thing was, that when the directors' meeting at length broke up at nearly half past one, there was his lordship's car and his lordship's chauffeur, but his lordship's private secretary still hadn't returned.

" But where's Tidman ? " asked Lord Longwood, looking helplessly round for some means of getting rid of his papers.

In this highly organised civilisation of ours, there will generally be found some voice to answer all questions put by people with over ten thousand a year, even though those questions be addressed, as was the case with this one, to nothing more definite than the circum-ambient air. The man Robinson emerged from the background and took up his cue.

" Mr. Tidman's gone, my lord," he said.

" Gone ? " repeated his lordship.

" Yes, my lord."

" Was he ill ? "

" I couldn't say, my lord. I don't think so."

Lord Longwood blinked at Robinson, blinked at the entrance hall, blinked up and down Wood Street, and finally blinked himself into his car.

" Look here," were his last words to the man Robinson. " If my secretary comes back, you'd better tell him that I've gone to lunch,"

"Very good, my lord."

The big limousine uttered a solitary, deep-throated warning of its intentions, and moved away.

"Extraordinary thing," muttered Lord Longwood to himself. "What on earth can he have been thinking of? He can't have forgotten about me."

But this was just where Lord Longwood was wrong.

2

It seems a little obvious, perhaps, to say that nothing marks the passage of time so much as one's birthdays, since it was precisely for this purpose, presumably, that birthdays were first invented. But what I am thinking of when I say this, is the remarkable change in one's attitude towards these anniversaries which takes place as the years go by, and how unpleasantly the recognition of this change accentuates what one might otherwise hope to forget—namely, that it isn't only one's friends who are growing older.

The glowing sensation of heroism which attaches to a birthday when one first becomes conscious of its existence, makes it all the harder to bear when the discovery is made (about the age of fourteen) that the enthusiasm of one's relatives for this particular occasion is beginning to cool off. A child with even the most elementary knowledge of mathematics cannot but recognise that if the number of presents goes on diminishing like this, a year will very soon arrive when there will no longer be any at all. And then, as the last of the birthday presents does in fact disappear, comes the dread realisation that this once happy day has had all the time a hidden and horrible significance; that instead of merely marking additions to one's toy-cupboard, one's sporting outfit, or one's savings-bank account, it has been persistently, if surreptitiously, marking one's approach to decrepitude and decay.

It is at the moment of this discovery that many people reach the sudden decision that they will never have another birthday again. Under sufficient pressure from official sources they will perhaps admit to having been

born in a certain year, even on a certain day, but for all personal and social purposes the anniversaries of that date are from this instant struck off the calendar. And if a long-lost brother, returning late in life from New Zealand, be rash enough suddenly to wish them many happy returns of the day, then will occur another of those violent and often fatal outbreaks of senile fury, whose explanation has baffled so many distinguished alienists.

All this leads in the direction of Mr. Alexander Fraser, sitting at his desk in the offices of Fraser and Company in Pardon Court, who, raising his eyes to the adjustable almanack which hung on the opposite wall, realised before he could stop himself that whereas yesterday he had been twenty-eight, to-day he was twenty-nine, and that this occurrence had provoked no single comment of any description whatsoever from any person on the face of the earth.

His melancholy, yet pleasing countenance became convulsed with gloom.

"Good Lord!" he groaned aloud. "In a year from to-day I shall be thirty." And the grave seemed to yawn before him.

"At this age," he told himself, dropping his fountain-pen from his nerveless grasp, "Alexander the Great had conquered the East, the younger Pitt had been Prime Minister, Napoleon had returned in triumph from Italy, Jack Dempsey had knocked out Carpentier. And what have I done?"

The answer was only too apparent. Nothing.

True, a conspiracy between the British and German governments had deprived him of four and a half years of very valuable time, but could he accept this as a permissible excuse? Hadn't other warriors managed to overcome this handicap? Hadn't his brother got married and made a name for himself at the Bar? Hadn't Jim Grant got married and made his fortune in the City? Hadn't John Ormroyd got married and had a run of four hundred nights at a London theatre? While he—what could he have been doing with himself

all the time ? Coming down to the office, going home to the flat, playing golf on his holidays, and all the while that infernal almanack had been watching him and sneering at him. Laughing to itself, no doubt, to see him come in here every day and fritter away his time answering letters and talking to his partner and reading the Public Ledger. Bah !

And yet, the next moment, for some inscrutable reason connected doubtless with the general trouble originally caused by the Fall of Man, instead of going on his knees and taking an oath that the rest of his life should be devoted to concentrated self-improvement, what must he do but begin wondering how he could best celebrate this, the last birthday which he would ever have the face to celebrate at all.

How about asking his brother and his sister-in-law to dine and go to a play ? Maurice could be trusted to have forgotten that any special significance attached to the date, so that there would be no risk of his feeling that he would have to turn up with a box of cigars or anything of that sort.

He reached for the telephone and gave the number of his brother's chambers.

"I say," he said, when at length he had prevailed on the clerk to put him through. "I say, are you and Beatrix doing anything to-night ?"

"Yes," said Maurice. "Why ?"

Between brothers, words are not wasted.

"Oh," said Mr. Fraser junior. "I thought perhaps you might have dined with me somewhere and——"

"Why ?" broke in Maurice again. "Aren't you dining with us to-morrow ?"

Dash it all ! So he was. He had quite forgotten.

"Oh, yes, of course," he stammered. "Only I——"

"All right. We'll see you then. I'm afraid I'm awfully busy now. Good-bye."

The conversation was over.

There you are, you see. Alexander the Great, or the younger Pitt would certainly have thought of looking in their engagement-books before they had begun issuing

invitations to dinner. But he, it seemed, couldn't even do that.

Yet he still felt that something must be done to mark the importance of the day; something, that was, in addition to making a fool of himself on the telephone. And he still couldn't call into his mind any better suggestion than some kind of a dinner.

Well, then, if Maurice and Beatrix couldn't come, it must be a man's dinner. Agreed.

And they would dine at the Club and play bridge afterwards at the flat. Also agreed.

Then three other men would be needed. Undoubtedly. But who?

At this point the whole plan of celebrating the birthday as nearly as possible fell to the ground. But as destiny had to be fulfilled, Fate at this moment caused the door to open, and the other partner in Fraser and Company to come wandering aimlessly into the room. A tall, untidy figure, of indeterminate age, with a bald forehead, immensely thick spectacles, and a fitful, schoolboyish grin, George Lucas is not only a partner, but also a distant cousin of the man with the birthday.

"G'morning, Bill," he remarked, as he kicked the door shut again behind him. (I don't know why Alexander Fraser was always called Bill, but he was. And this being the case, we had better call him that too.)

"I came in to say something," George Lucas went on thoughtfully. "But I can't remember what it was."

"Never mind," said Bill sympathetically. "Can you dine with me to-night?"

"Yes, certainly," said George, pausing in his retreat. "Why?"

"Never mind why," said Bill hastily. "Or if you must, then try and imagine it's because I want you."

"Oh, all right. When and where, and must I dress?"

"Corinthian at eight and yes," answered Bill succinctly.

"Is anybody else coming?"

"Yes. Two other fellows."

"Oh; who?"

An awkward question this, but Bill parried it.

"Two fellows from the Club," he said.

"What are they called?"

"I don't know," said Bill impatiently.

"You don't know?" repeated George, with a look of surprise. "Why, what's the idea?"

"I mean I haven't asked them yet."

"Oh," said George. "Why not?"

"Because," explained Bill, laboriously and politely, "the idea of giving this dinner has only just come into my head."

"Oh," said George, with apparent relief. "Then need we have the other two fellows?"

"Not if you'd rather not."

"Well, it's your party," George admitted generously.

"Well, I'm sure *I* don't want them," said Bill.

And so at last it was settled. And nothing any longer remained to distinguish the twenty-ninth birthday from any of the other countless evenings on which Bill Fraser had dined with George Lucas, or George Lucas had dined with Bill Fraser. Nothing, that is, in the evening as planned. There was something, however, in the evening, as it turned out.

3

Not all the north-countrymen who come to London end up as peers and millionaires. There are a few scattered exceptions to every rule. Take Mr. Robert Fraser, for instance, the father of Maurice and Bill, as happy-go-lucky a failure as any that are bred on this side of the Trent. At the age of thirty-three he succeeded to the nominal control of the family business, an export agency with its headquarters at Leith, which acted on behalf of a group of Scottish manufacturers and sold their goods principally in Northern Russia and the Baltic provinces. In so far as he was happy-go-lucky, he should have been content to let the managing clerk go on running the business, which would have ensured him a comfortable and increasing income for the rest of his life. But in so far as he was predestined to be a

failure, this wasn't good enough for him. He was a man who reacted violently and with the utmost perversity to all outside advice, and more violently and perversely than ever, when such advice was tendered by his relations.

Unfortunately, his great-uncle Hector, who ought to have known better at the age of ninety-two, went out of his way to comment first on the capabilities of Mr. McWhinnie, the aforesaid managing clerk, and secondly on the superiority of Leith as a centre of business to any other town on the face of the globe. This was quite enough for Mr. Robert Fraser. Then and there he decided to pension off McWhinnie and to transfer his business to London, and, the remainder of the clan immediately siding with great-uncle Hector, the thing was done. The office in Leith and the house in Edinburgh were sold, and an office in London and a house in Kent were acquired. As might have been expected, the majority of the Scottish manufacturers took the first opportunity of entering into dealings elsewhere, for they naturally preferred to make use of agents in their own part of the kingdom. This didn't worry Mr. Robert Fraser, for nothing ever did. He was perfectly convinced that in a very short time he would have established relations with far bigger and richer English firms, and on the strength of this conviction, assisted by a manner which possessed an irresistible charm for almost everyone except his relatives, he continued to pick up an extraordinary, hand-to-mouth living for another twenty or twenty-five years.

The books of Fraser and Company during this period contain references to dealings in almost every conceivable commodity which has ever been bought or sold, and there was a great deal more that never got into the books at all. Political economists would gasp and shudder at the possibility revealed by these records, of making an annual profit ranging between fifty and five thousand pounds a year, simply and solely by getting in the way of the wheels of trade. Yet this, to be perfectly open about it, was all that Mr. Fraser ever did.

Serene optimism and a complete disregard for all moral restrictions other than those to which the law lends its support, were his only stock-in-trade, for his original capital had soon been eaten up by the inevitable accidents of his calling. But though he represented a class of business man whose existence must, I suppose, be deplored, it seems harsh to brand him as a menace to society. The scale on which he conducted his operations was too limited for his individual efforts to have any noticeable effect on the cost of living. If it had been otherwise, I should not have called him a failure, and he might well have joined the society of millionaires and peers. Let it also be recorded that he adored and was adored by both his wife and his two children.

In the year 1908, while waiting for a train at Wordingham station, Mr. Fraser had the ill-fortune to step on a fragment from the skin of a banana, and, by a natural sequence of events, to dislocate his shoulder. This painful reminder of mortality suddenly caused him to realise that steps ought really to be taken to carry on his invaluable business when the inevitable day for his own retirement should at length arrive. Lying in his bed at the White House, from whose windows one could, when the leaves were off the trees, see across the fields to Hare Hall, he cast about in his mind as to whom he should select to inherit this precious charge. Maurice's future had already been mapped out, and a considerable amount of plunder had been set aside to keep him at Oxford and enable him to read for the Bar. But what about Bill? Well, Bill was a bit young for one to be able to judge his potentialities. He might or he might not develop the piratical tendencies which were necessary to the business, but at present there were very few signs of them. Still Bill should have his chance. Only by the time Bill was ready for this, he himself would—there was no use disguising it—be getting on in life. Would it be safe or practicable to entrust the delicate machinery of Pardon Court to the mercies of such young and inexperienced hands? For a brief moment Mr. Fraser envisaged the disastrous results which might

ensue if he were no longer in a position to guide and direct his younger son's faltering footsteps, and then, suddenly, he had an idea.

"I know what I'll do," he said. "I'll take a partner. That'll solve everything. Somebody a bit older than Bill, who can look after him if I'm not there. That's the idea."

He called out to his wife, and told her of his decision.

"Yes, darling," said Mrs. Fraser, as she had always said to every suggestion that he had ever made. "That will be splendid."

Looking round to discover whom he should select for the honour of sharing his uncertain profits and his formidable liabilities, Mr. Fraser's attention was attracted by his distant cousin, George Lucas, who was at that time occupying the unenviable position of the family black sheep.

The fact that George had been spurned and cast off by a unanimous synod of his Scottish relations was all the recommendation that Mr. Fraser required. "There must be some good in the fellow," he said, "if none of them will speak to him. I'll have him down for the week-end."

George Lucas's forehead wasn't so high in those days, and his spectacles weren't so thick, but his grin had for the time being vanished altogether. Where formerly it had been almost constant and later was again to become fitful, it had now temporarily deserted him, together with a considerable quantity of ideas and ideals which, it is to be feared, would never return at all. For this was what George had done. He had come up to London to take a post in a bank, he had represented the said bank in a Saturday afternoon match against the Lloyd's Underwriters' Clerks' Football Club, and he had displaced a cartilage in his left leg. On the Sunday afternoon, finding that his discomfort was increasing rather than otherwise, he had staggered round to the nearest doctor's in search of relief, and had taken his place in a deserted waiting-room. Unfortunately for everybody concerned, this particular doctor

had formed the unattractive habit of being completely intoxicated from Saturday evening until Monday morning, and he was at this particular moment engaged in the still less attractive practice of assaulting his wife.

The noise of battle came drifting in to the wounded footballer, and after he had stood it for five or six minutes he decided to make closer investigation of the cause of these alarming sounds. A less impulsive man, on making the discovery which George then made, might have tiptoed from the house and have sought his medical advice elsewhere. But this was not George's way. Instead, he felled the exhilarated physician to the earth and removed the physician's hysterical wife in a four-wheeled cab. Incidentally the offending cartilage took advantage of this opportunity to return to its original position, so that on the following morning he was able to limp back to his work. But the doctor's wife declined to return to her original position. She was, unfortunately, a clinger, and she had made up her mind to cling to George. And George, unfortunately, being young and soft-hearted, let her cling.

You can see the kind of thing that followed. The doctor sobered up in due course, and, recalling to mind that an Englishman's house was his castle and that an Englishman's wife was his property, proceeded to entangle himself in an indescribably sordid mixture of private enquiry agents and cheap solicitors. And all the time the woman continued to cling, rather like the ivy, but at considerably greater expense.

And so George became a black sheep, for of course you can't keep these things out of the newspapers. His bank gave him a month's salary in lieu of notice, his relations in Scotland wrote and told him that he would oblige them by never darkening their doors again, a young woman in the same part of the kingdom demanded the return of a considerable number of letters, and his friends in London left him to lie on the bed or to stew in the juice which he had made for himself. Meanwhile the month's salary went but a short way towards meeting the extra expenses for which he had

made himself responsible. It was at this period that George's hair began to retreat.

And the annoying thing about the whole business, as anyone with less impracticable ideas of chivalry would have confessed, was that in the end the only person to suffer permanently from it all was George himself. For within a year of that unlucky football match the doctor had broken his neck by falling off the pavement outside his club, and his wife had succumbed to pneumonia brought on by looking into shop windows in the rain. Thus, when it is too late, does Fate point the moral of the uselessness of intervening in the affairs of married people. The black sheep, with his fleece shorn to the skin, mounted an inferior stool in an inferior bank, and was left to wonder what the dickens the purpose of the whole thing had been.

One can imagine the clumsy gratitude with which he leapt at Mr. Fraser's unexpected offer; the frenzy with which he set to work to show that the confidence which he had gained had not been misplaced; and the bewilderment with which he discovered the kind of establishment that he was in. But though bewildered, he remained grateful. He made up his mind to build up at least a corner of the business which should aim at some kind of permanency and respectability, and in this attempt, perhaps owing to the senior partner's now failing vitality, he succeeded. Messrs. Fraser and Company—the Company at last representing something more than a few clerks and an office boy—continued to plunge wildly about in the produce markets, to gamble in re-insurance, and to afford temporary domicile for the registered offices of phantom firms; but out of the wreckage of the old days in Leith there had still been left a nucleus of trade with Russia, and under George Lucas's tender care this nucleus again grew and developed. In four years Messrs. Fraser had reached the responsible position of acting as sole agents in this part of Europe for a number of the big English and Scottish hosiery manufacturers, a position which was attained after much travelling and negotiation by George, and

in spite of much brilliantly impractical assistance from the senior partner. A new atmosphere and reputation grew up in the old office in Pardon Court. Almost without realising it, Mr. Fraser began taking longer and longer week-ends at home, while the direction of affairs fell more and more into George's hands. Bank managers and commercial enquiry bureaux saw fit to revise the entries which they had made opposite the firm's name. The old piratical days seemed to have departed for ever.

In the autumn of 1913, Mr. Fraser returned one day from the office to the White House, and was sitting after dinner, dreaming as usual over his evening newspaper, when his wife, sewing on the opposite side of the fireplace, thought she heard him murmur her name. She looked up, but his eyes were closed. She must have been mistaken, for he had obviously fallen asleep, as he had taken to doing in the evenings of late. She threw him an affectionate smile, and was returning to her embroidery, when suddenly something in his attitude made her heart stand still. Quickly she rose and leant over him, and then she knew what had happened. The doctor was telephoned for at once, but that last utterance of her name had been the end. No more would Robert Fraser's old-fashioned clothes and flowing tie appear on the platform of Wordingham Station, in the garden of the White House, or in his room in Pardon Court. No more would George Lucas have to dread the sudden inroads into the firm's bank balance, which to the last had complicated and endangered his work of reconstruction. The senior partner in Messrs. Fraser and Company had become a junior partner in a far larger and more mysterious business.

Mrs. Fraser went about very quietly and uncomplainingly for another three weeks, and then she was found dead in her bed. Heart failure, said the doctors, and as heart failure we may let it stand. But there is more than one kind of heart.

Maurice was now living in his chambers in the Temple, and Bill had just finished his first year at Oxford. George

Lucas wanted him to stay there and take his degree, or said he wanted it, but Bill decided otherwise. Mr. Fraser's estate, even after the White House had been sold, did not provide for the income of two sons in such unremunerative occupations as briefless barrister and undergraduate. So at the end of the Michaelmas term Bill had his own way, and came to London to learn, under George's guidance, how to sell British underwear to Mongolian customers. Sometimes he felt very sorry for himself, and sometimes he didn't, and in this he showed no marked variation from other young men of his age.

You may remember what happened in August of the following year. Quite a quantity of people who hadn't intended to do anything of the sort, suddenly decided that it would be a good idea if they went into the army. Maurice went into the army. Bill went into the army. And George Lucas cursed and swore in a most alarming manner because in those days they wouldn't have men of his age and with his kind of spectacles in the army. Of course, if he had overcome this prejudice on the part of the military authorities, it would necessarily have meant the winding up of Fraser and Company for good and all. But this was the kind of thing which in the strange month that I have mentioned seemed of comparatively little interest or importance. Bill certainly would have had no objection, but then Bill had quite made up his mind that he was going to be killed—a curiously unusual attitude at the time, considering everything. However, the authorities would have none of George Lucas, and in baffled rage he flung himself into a fresh frenzy of work. He wrote to Bill, who was now performing evolutions with a dummy rifle somewhere in the Midlands, to tell him that he had decided to go out to Russia again and see their various correspondents himself. And from this point the story of the partners goes forward on somewhat less conventional and more unexpected lines.

For in the first place Bill wasn't killed. He wasn't even wounded in the ordinary sense of the word,

Through no fault of his own, he was laid low with the childish and unwarlike complaint of measles—though grown-up measles can be no joke—which kept him in England over the first Christmas; and by the time that he had recovered, he was instructed to proceed to Salonika, where, in spite of all efforts on his part to be taken away, he remained for nearly four years, the final portion of which he spent in hospital with a broken leg, the gift of a mule, who had determined that whoever else might join in the general advance, Bill Fraser certainly should not. So much for the military partner. Now for the civilian.

George did go out to Russia. He was there for four months, and a very remarkable four months they were, even according to his own account, which was a pretty vague and obscure source of information. What exactly he was doing at the front or how on earth he got there, no one ever discovered. His own description of the affair, when he could be induced to refer to it, suggested that he had acted as a kind of combatant red-cross worker with a dash of interpreter thrown in. There seems no equivalent for this post in our own army. The culmination of the whole unusual business occurred on a day when he fell into a shell-hole and broke his spectacles. While still floundering in the mud, he was joined, suddenly and violently, by a Russian officer. According to George's version of the story, he had clung to the new arrival and by him been led back to safety, but if this was all that happened, how are we to account for what followed?

George groped his way back to Petrograd and bought himself another pair of lenses, with the assistance of which he was able to decipher a frantic telegram from the clerk whom he had left in charge in London, beseeching him to state instantly whether he were alive or dead.

This telegram seems to have reminded him that he was not as entirely free from responsibilities and attachments as he had in the excitement of the moment imagined. He granted himself immediate and indefinite leave, and came back to England. By the time that

he had got things straight again in London and was even considering whether he might not have another go on the Eastern front, the first of the revolutions had broken out.

But Russia had not yet quite finished with him. For, many months later, long after the hand which had authorised it had disappeared into Siberia, there arrived in Pardon Court an official document, describing in glowing terms how one George Lucas had rescued a certain General Schmidt (one must apologise for this name, but truth must prevail) under heavy fire, and acquainting him that there had been conferred on him the Imperial Order of St. George (third-class), which would carry with it the honorary rank of Pod-Polkovnik. The order itself, unluckily, never arrived.

George Lucas put the document away in a cupboard and forgot about it—it was Bill who afterwards discovered it and had it framed—for by now he had other things to think about. The business which he had so carefully built up with years of patient effort, the business which he had hoped to guard and increase for his benefactor's son, had been knocked completely endways by forces which not even a Pod-Polkovnik could hope to control. For on the one hand, eighty per cent. of his foreign markets had vanished into thin air, and on the other, the British Government had stepped in and diverted to its own uses all the goods which he might have sold to his remaining customers. He didn't give in. After one final rejection by the recruiting authorities, he returned to Pardon Court, he cut down his own expenses to the bare minimum, and by one desperate expedient after another he just managed to keep the firm's head above water. Slowly and far from surely things improved. When the junior partner at length returned, there was still a precarious kind of livelihood to be made out of Fraser and Company, and for want of anything better to do with themselves, they carried on. But it was a pretty black outlook.

They couldn't switch suddenly over to some other kind of business, for they hadn't the capital to begin

with. And they couldn't break out into fresh markets, for, thanks to the general tightening-up of the strands of commerce which had been taking place during the past quarter of a century, and had been so much accentuated by the war, the ground everywhere else was already covered by sole agents, into whose territory no one could hope to intrude. Short of converting the South Sea savages to the use of British hosiery goods, there was nothing to be done, except to watch their former rivals batten on the post-war boom, and make the best of the twenty per cent. which remained to them in Northern Europe. For a short time the boom had even managed to swell this miserable residue, but it had long since reached its appointed end, and in spite of the most encouraging prophecies from tax-gatherers and other interested parties, there seemed very little prospect of its return.

They might, of course, have given in. The commercial waters would have closed over their heads with scarcely a ripple. But apart from sentiment, and an unbusiness-like desire to keep the small staff going, it was perhaps only human to wish to preserve the illusion that somewhere about the premises there was concealed a goodwill, whose shrivelled proportions any attempt to dispose of it must instantly have revealed. So they continued to stick it out. In defiance of all the economic laws which were constantly working towards their destruction, and with a truly national objection to looking the almost inevitable future in the face, they carried on their unprofitable task. After all, they were both bachelors, and nobody minds how hard up a bachelor is.

Such were Fraser and Company, of Pardon Court, London, E.C.

4

Bill Fraser called his home a flat, and the house agent who had let it to him had called it a flat, but you or I would have been more likely to call it an afterthought. And this was really what it was. Regency House began well. It had a preliminary layer of intensely respectable

shops. A hosier who had never in his life imagined such a thing as a ready-made shirt; a tobacconist, whose status may be gathered from the fact that his window was decorated with one, solitary, mammoth cigar-cabinet; an extremely sinister-looking chemist, who spelt himself "chymist"; these, and others of a like description, accounted for the ground floor of the building. Then came a layer of political club, which occupied the whole of what Englishmen call the first floor and Americans call the second story. Then came five layers of private flats, and then, until a few years ago, had come the roof. But during the height of the housing shortage, the proprietors of Regency House had had the happy thought of excavating this roof; of punching holes in the sides and calling them windows, of rigging up flimsy partitions and calling the resulting cavities rooms, of changing the iron emergency ladder which began where the lift stopped for a kind of ship's companion which they called a staircase, and finally of letting off the whole additional story which they had thus created as further flats. It was the ship's companion which had frightened other tenants away and brought the rent of one of these storm-tossed eyries within the reach of Bill Fraser's purse; and it was here that he had lived, with the assistance of his housekeeper, Mrs. Whalley, ever since he had returned to London. Not a bad place in a way, but the address was expensively misleading where tradesmen were concerned. Only Bill didn't know this.

On the evening of his birthday he had walked back from the City, had looked in at the Corinthian Club to see the evening newspapers and order something a little (but not suspiciously) special in the way of dinner, and now, back in his sitting-room, he was just thinking of changing his clothes, when he suddenly remembered something. Was there anything for George to drink when they should, later on, return to the flat? He went over to the corner cupboard, and there he found a virgin bottle of whisky, and one, two, three empty syphons.

He put his head out of the door and shouted.

"Mrs. Whalley!" he called. And presently Mrs. Whalley appeared.

"Mr. Lucas is probably coming back with me after dinner to-night," he said. "Have I got any soda-water?"

"No, sir," said Mrs. Whalley.

"Do you mean absolutely none?"

"Not a drop, sir," said Mrs. Whalley, with melancholy and unhelpful precision.

"Then what am I to do?" asked Bill.

His question indicates the completeness with which, like all other bachelors in similar circumstances, he was at his housekeeper's mercy. It never occurred to him to put into words the criticism which he was sensible that her arrangements deserved. He merely placed himself uncomplainingly in her hands, as he had done so many hundreds of times before, and would do, presumably, so many thousands of times again.

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Whalley. "I'm afraid it's too late to telephone anywhere now, but I expect you could get some at the shop downstairs. I'd offer to go myself," she added, "only. . . ."

And here she stopped. Not that Bill had interrupted her, for it would really have been a matter of considerable interest to him to learn of any reason why Mrs. Whalley should not go out and get the soda-water herself. But of course he had not, and she knew it, the courage to solve this enigma by a direct question. Instead, as her sad and superior eye gradually overwhelmed him, he actually found himself moving towards his hat.

"Oh, all right," he muttered. "I'll run down and get some now."

Satisfied that she had demonstrated her continued power to keep her employer thoroughly in his place, Mrs. Whalley permitted herself a slight relaxation in her tone.

"I'm sorry you should have the trouble, sir," she said.

"Not at all, Mrs. Whalley," he replied gallantly, and with these words they separated.

But it wasn't until he reached the street that it suddenly occurred to him to wonder at what particular kind of establishment one did, in fact, buy bottles of soda-water. Mrs. Whalley had said "the shop," but, as has been explained, Regency House was entirely supported on shops. And such shops as they were, too. Not lightly or casually did one brave the baleful and contemptuous glances with which their occupants were in the habit of favouring anyone who interrupted what appeared to be their abstract contemplation of the theory of retail trade. If one arrived in a motor, and gave a fifty-pound order, well and good. But to ask for a single syphon of soda-water was going to take some courage, and to ask for it at the wrong shop would be even worse.

In this moment of indecision, Bill Fraser's eye lit on his own hall-porter, taking the evening air at the edge of the pavement. He approached him.

"Oh, Barron," he said, in what he hoped would appear an easy, off-hand manner. "I've got to get some soda-water in rather a hurry. What would be the best place?"

"Ibbs and Willingham, sir," replied the porter. "I expect they'd let you have some."

The Wine Merchants. This was even worse than he had feared.

"Thanks," he murmured. "Thanks very much." And he moved slowly away.

Now surely there can be no need to emphasise the bravery which it requires to enter the premises of a West-End wine merchant, with whom one has never dealt before, and ask to be supplied with a small quantity of a non-alcoholic beverage. Messrs. Ibbs and Willingham were, if possible, even more forbidding and respectable in their outward appearance than the other shops which have been mentioned. They certainly carried simplicity in the decoration of their façade to the furthest possible degree. Not a trace of a bottle was to be seen from the street. The whole lower part of the window was filled in with a wire screen, into which the

names of the partners had been ingeniously woven ; while the upper portion was blank, save for a small shield, glued to the surface of the glass, which bore the arms of some royal dynasty, and two or three white enamelled letters below it, which represented all that was left of the mystic phrase, " By appointment."

For a moment the thought entered Bill's head of retreating to his flat and ringing Messrs. Ibbs and Willingham up on the telephone, but obstinacy rather than courage made him discard this unmanly idea. He pushed the door open and entered.

Inside all was cloistral gloom. He could detect a number of cases of wine standing about, some with the tops half off and straw emerging from within. As he became more accustomed to the darkness, he also saw hanging on the walls a quantity of objects resembling framed pictures, except that where one would expect the picture to be, there merely appeared the name of one or other of the more celebrated brands of champagne. But as for any sign of human life, that seemed to be completely lacking.

He coughed.

As the echoes died away, a sallow gentleman with a blue chin emerged from behind a pile of packing cases. He looked the intruder up and down with a critical eye, as if to decide whether the cut of his clothes would justify him in speaking to him at all, or whether it would be necessary to ring for him to be shown out. Apparently Bill's tailor had succeeded in passing him off as something approaching the required standard, for the sallow gentleman spoke.

" Yes, sir ? " he said, in a hollow voice.

" I'm very sorry to trouble you," Bill began nervously, " but I wondered if you could let me—if you could oblige me, that is, with a syphon, or—or a few syphons. Most unfortunately I've run out of soda-water, and as I've got a man coming in to-night, I——"

He broke off. The sallow gentleman had said nothing, but his look silenced him. Though well aware that in endeavouring to effect an exchange of Messrs. Ibbs and

Willingham's goods for his money, he was neither seeking a favour nor offering an insult, Bill had all the sensations of one who has committed an unpardonable breach of good manners ; such feelings as a man might have, who had (let us hope only in a nightmare) risen during the sermon and asked the clergyman in a loud voice where he bought his collars. He began to feel the perspiration breaking out on the back of his neck.

The sallow gentleman raised his eyebrows, turned, and disappeared again behind the packing cases.

It is impossible to say whether it was his intention to leave his unfortunate customer to his fate, or whether he had departed to seek some inferior attendant who might permit himself to deal with the low kind of person that Bill had shown himself to be, for scarcely had he withdrawn than the door of the shop was again opened. Not gingerly and respectfully, as Bill had opened it, but with self-confident violence. And a tall figure wearing a soft felt hat and a raincoat strode quickly in. He gave a quick, penetrating glance at Bill Fraser, another rapid look round the empty room, and then throwing his stick up in the air and catching it again near the ferrule, he brought the head down with a bang on the nearest case of wine. And as he completed this manoeuvre he called out in a loud, clear and penetrating voice, "Hi! Shop!"

Surely never before had Messrs. Ibbs and Willingham's establishment echoed to such an extraordinary, such an unprecedented sound. Bill Fraser drew back into a corner, determined on no account to miss the scene which must follow.

He had not long to wait. Almost immediately his sallow enemy re-emerged from his hiding-place. He seemed to be just on the point of giving Bill, as the supposed originator of the two noises, what is generally known as a piece of his mind, when he suddenly caught sight of the new arrival. He had reached his conclusions about that hat and coat in a flash.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

One would have thought that anybody addressed in that tone must either have left the shop within the next

five seconds, or have flung himself in an ungovernable fury at the sallow gentleman's throat. But the new arrival did neither of these things. He only smiled pleasantly.

"I want a bottle of whisky," he said.

The shopman seemed to shake his head, though almost imperceptibly.

"We only sell whisky by the case," he remarked, and was preparing, apparently, to withdraw once more, when the new arrival addressed him again.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, politely, but a little grimly.

"I said, sir, that we do not supply single bottles." Messrs. Ibbs and Willingham's representative's manner was clearly intended to put a final stoppage to the discussion. But in this it failed.

The newcomer went a little nearer to him:

"Why not?" he asked.

In his corner by the door, Bill was beginning to enjoy himself. Was it possible that he was to see his own humiliation avenged so soon and so satisfactorily? He almost held his breath.

The sallow man seemed for the first time to be a little uneasy, but he encouraged himself by another look at that shabby raincoat, and answered:

"Because it is not our practice to do so."

"Then," said the man in the raincoat, "the sooner you change that practice, the better. Here," he went on, plunging his hand into his pocket and withdrawing it with a sound as of half-crowns, "here is legal tender for one bottle of whisky. Now, then, are you going to let me have it, or not?"

He had extended his flattened palm so as to exhibit the coins, but as he finished speaking, his fingers closed over them and his hand took the form of a wiry and muscular-looking fist. The sallow man's jaw seemed to drop. He gave one last desperate look towards Bill, but Bill turned hastily away; and the next moment he heard him saying, with a miserable attempt at ease, "Oh, well, sir, to oblige you, I don't see why I shouldn't let you have an odd bottle."

"I'm glad you look at it like that," said the stranger.

The sallow man stooped down and extracted a bottle from some invisible recess.

"Sixteen shillings," he said, planting it on one of the cases.

"Twelve and sixpence," replied the man in the raincoat.

Bill continued to listen in amazement, but something still more amazing was to follow.

"Oh, very well," said the sallow man.

He had actually accepted the suggested reduction!

The man in the raincoat planked down his coins beside the bottle.

"Wrap it up," he ordered.

And the sallow man wrapped it up.

This looked like the end of the entertainment, and Bill was just preparing to slip out into the street, to resume his quest for soda-water elsewhere, when the whisky-buyer suddenly turned towards him, and raising his hat, said:

"I beg your pardon, sir. I am afraid that I interrupted you just now. Was there anything that you were wanting?"

He didn't exactly wink as he said this, but something in his expression offered and invited confidence. It was almost as if he had said out loud, "Come on! Let's get some more fun out of this blighter!" Bill felt himself responding.

"I was just trying to get some soda-water," he said.

"But there seemed to be some little difficulty."

"I can imagine that," said the man in the raincoat, with an air of grave sympathy. "Would half a dozen syphons do you all right?" he added.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I only wanted one," said Bill.

"One," repeated the man in the raincoat, and this time he really did wink. "Just let me have a syphon," he said, turning to the shopman. And the shopman, his spirit completely broken, again stooped down in the darkness at the back of the room and did as he was told.

In dignified silence Bill handed him a Treasury note, received his change, and took his departure ; his retreat being covered until the last moment by his strange fellow-customer. And then, as he breathed the cooler and calmer atmosphere of the street, the full beauty of the incidents which had led up to the jaundiced brigand's discomfiture seemed to strike him afresh. With his syphon clasped under his arm, the melancholy expression had slipped from his face, ten years had gone from his apparent age, and he began to laugh.

The man in the raincoat, the neck of his own bottle projecting from one of its pockets, stood watching him with a curious air of almost proprietary pride—a look which we may come to know well later on, although no longer directed at Bill. Seen in the clearer light of the street—for this is the late spring—there can be no doubt about the shabbiness of his clothing. And yet there is nothing shabby about the man himself. He holds himself well, his face is an educated face and a self-disciplined face, and, for people who are interested in such things where men are concerned, a good-looking face too. Bill Fraser, emerging from his first attack of chuckles, becomes suddenly conscious of the quizzical examination which he is undergoing, and stops abruptly.

It is at this point in his recollection of the evening that Bill's memory seemed afterwards to come on a blank. He must have said something to the stranger and the stranger must have answered him, and from this they must have passed on to a knowledge of each other's names. But was it Bill's suggestion or Austin Harvey's hypnotism which resulted in their accompanying each other back into Regency House and up in the lift ? It is no use asking Bill, for he simply can't remember. When his memory does begin to work again, they were just entering his sitting-room.

"No," Harvey was saying ; "I don't know that I'd go out of the way to risk being snubbed by that kind of fellow any more than you or anyone else would. I'm as cowardly as the best of us in the ordinary way, when it comes to tipping waiters or asking the price of a suit.

But every now and then—and particularly when I'm rather up against things—I suddenly feel that I've got to go and put one of those bloated blighters in his proper place. I saw you going into that shop just now, and I saw that brute trying to insult you, and I just thought we might get some fun out of it."

He stopped, and looked with an odd expression at the bottle of whisky, which he was holding out in front of him.

"Only I wish I'd thought of asking for soda-water too," he added. "That would have been even more fun. Whisky's poison to me. Look here," he went on suddenly; "I'll tell you what. I'll sell it you."

"You'll sell it me?" repeated Bill. "The whisky, do you mean?"

"Yes. Twelve and sixpence I paid for it, and for twelve and sixpence it's yours. Come on, now. I'm sure you can always do with a bottle of whisky."

"But——"

"You must," said Harvey. "That twelve and sixpence has cleaned me out. I told you that I only went and did silly things like that, when I was up against it. Well, thinking it over, I've come to the conclusion that I'd rather have the money. But, of course, if you don't drink whisky either——"

"No, no. Of course I'll take it off your hands. Why, it was worth ten times the money to see you make that fellow crumple up. Come on, hand it over."

"You're sure you do drink it?"

"If I never did before," said Bill, avoiding a direct confession of his abstemious habits, "I should start to-night. Why, what do you suppose I wanted the syphon for?"

"That's true," said the man in the raincoat; and the exchange was made.

"Well, good-night," he suddenly added, picking up his hat. "I must be getting along." And he moved towards the door.

"No, look here. I say, wait a bit——" Bill began. Somehow it seemed so impossible to let this man, who

had just confessed that five half-crowns stood between him and destitution, disappear like this. Yet it wasn't easy to offer help or put questions to some one who seemed to be very nearly his own age, and to have been very lately in his own rank in life. While he was still floundering, the mysterious Harvey came to his assistance.

"I'll stay if you're bored," he said. "I've nothing else to do."

Bill suddenly remembered his dinner, and glanced at the clock. In ten minutes George would be due at the Corinthian, and he hadn't even begun to change. He temporised.

"Do you mind waiting a minute or two, while I dress?" he asked.

"Why, certainly, if——"

"Have a cigarette, then. I won't be a couple of minutes."

So Austin Harvey helped himself from the box on the mantelpiece, and Bill went through into his bedroom, leaving the communicating door open.

Now what on earth did he imagine that he was doing?

Just as he is still unable to explain exactly how it was that Harvey first entered his flat, so he finds the same impossibility in saying why, when he had got there, he should have gone out of his way to press him to stay. Had he some vague idea of—but no; as he hastened through his dressing, he was aware of a complete absence of any idea as to what in the world he was going to do, when, in the course of the next few minutes, the problem should require its instant solution. There were people, of course, who made rather a point of encouraging adventures of this sort; of allotting themselves the principal parts in amateur Arabian Nights. Such persons found no difficulty, apparently, in adopting the mixture of patronage and impertinence which these episodes require. But Bill had never been one of these. Time and inclination had both been lacking; added to which, he strongly mistrusted his powers of getting himself clear of any such incident when its interest had been

exhausted, which is, after all, the real test for followers of Haroun-al-Raschid.

Yet he had gone and asked the fellow to wait, and when you do this to a man who has just announced that he is on the verge of ruin, things become unpleasantly complicated by a sensation of moral responsibility for the fellow's future.

Or was this attitude of mind only another example of his general unfitness for coping with life ?

Meanwhile, it suddenly struck him that things were remarkably quiet in the next room. More than once he paused in the rather noisy business of struggling into a stiff shirt, and listened ; and the last time he was seized with the suspicion that his guest was no longer there. The uncertainty became intolerable. He lifted up his voice.

"Hullo !" he called.

The reply from the sitting-room was instantaneous.

"Hullo !" shouted Harvey.

Dash it all ! He must say something else now. So, for want of anything better, he called out :

"I'll be ready in another minute."

"If your dinner's at eight," the visitor called back, "you're going to be late."

"Am I ? Why, what's the time ?"

"Five minutes past by your clock."

"Oh, Lord. I believe it's slow too."

"Yes, it is."

At this point in the conversation it came into Bill's mind that his front stud, without which the completion of his toilet was impossible, had mysteriously disappeared from the place on his dressing-table where he was convinced that he had just put it. Perhaps it had got under his handkerchief, or mixed up with his keys. He began lifting things up all over the table, when suddenly he heard a familiar and fatal sound. In moving something, he had obviously pushed the stud over the edge, and it had, of course, rolled to its favourite position under the back of the table.

There was only one way of retrieving the brute when

it did this. One had to bend down and catch hold of the dressing-table by its lower edge, which, as it was also a chest of drawers, was about two inches from the floor, and then, straining and groaning, with the blood surging into one's temples, it was just possible, by exerting all one's strength, to jerk it out from the wall. Having done this, one could then recover the stud and leave it to Mrs. Whalley to get the dressing-table back into position.

He had bent down, and was bracing himself for the preliminary heave, when an idea came to him. In a strangled voice he called out once again.

"I say!" he shouted.

"Yes?" came the answer from the sitting-room.

"I say, be a good fellow and ring up my Club for me, will you?"

"Certainly. What's the message?"

"Ask them to tell my guest that I'll be a little late."

"A little late. Right you are."

"Yes. Regent 3601. Thanks awfully."

Bill heard him repeat the number to the operator, and then, setting his teeth, gave the necessary jerk to the chest of drawers. One corner slid away six inches from the wall, he stretched his arm behind it, and almost immediately had recovered the stud. And then, as he scrambled to his feet, his visitor's voice came through again from the next room.

"Is that the Corinthian?" he was asking, and then he gave the message.

"That's funny," thought Bill. A man must know a small club like the Corinthian fairly well, to recognise it straight off by its telephone number. Not very much in it, perhaps, but enough to make him say, as he returned to the sitting-room a few minutes later:

"You seemed to know that number pretty well?"

"That number? Oh, yes." Harvey seemed to rouse himself from his thoughts. "My chief used to live there, you see, when I was at the War Office."

"Oh," said Bill, adjusting the ends of his tie; and again he was thinking.

For the number of permanent bedrooms at the Corinthian was very small, and the number which had ever to his knowledge been occupied by a War Office official was smaller still. In fact he could only call to mind one such member. He tested his deduction.

"Do you mean Colonel Baxter?" he asked.

"That's the fellow."

"Oh, then you're——" Bill began, and then he stopped. His mind was hovering round a second deduction, and until he saw where it was going to lead him, it might be better to wait. Yet his interest had been aroused, and his even rarer curiosity. On the other hand, there was George Lucas to be remembered. One mustn't keep poor old George waiting any longer.

"Look here," he said finally, emerging from the bedroom with a clean handkerchief, whose appearance marked the conclusion of his dressing; "if you're not doing anything else, will you walk round with me to the Club?"

"Anywhere you like," answered Harvey, obligingly.

And so they left the flat again, and having scrambled down the companion, rang for the lift.

"Baxter," Bill was thinking all the time. "Baxter. . . . I wonder. . . ."

5

Old Major Baxter had held for countless years the position of supreme Corinthian bore. Bill could remember well the smoking-room jokes, when at the beginning of the war the news arrived that he had been gazetted, with the rank of captain, to a post in the Home Command. The suggestion had been put forward among the younger and less experienced soldiers present, that the War Office had made the appointment with the deliberate and ingenious intention of accelerating the training of recruits. For, it was pointed out, the man could scarcely exist who would not strain every nerve to escape, if only to the front, from the horror of this intolerable old fellow's company. Other jokes there had been of a similar nature, not all of them in equally

good taste. And then, as the years went on and the mockers departed to their various destinies, these pleasantries, together with Baxter himself, became forgotten. At the rare and incomplete meetings which took place among the junior Corinthians, there were naturally other and much more interesting matters to discuss than the fate of any of the Club bores.

It was towards the end of 1917 that Bill and others became gradually aware, from the English newspapers which reached them, of a growing boom in the stock of a general named—you have guessed it—Baxter. Starting quietly, the thing had in a short time reached gigantic proportions. Special correspondents and amateur strategists seemed to have conspired to spread the glory of his name; were continually suggesting that such and such an apparent success must in fairness be connected with the presence near the scene of operations of Baxter; deploring in the case of such and such a failure that the affair had not been in the hands of a man of the Baxter type; or hinting that the Government had its eye on a certain General B—— in its plans for the formation of this, that, or the other important inter-allied council. One newspaper even went so far as to affirm that if the war were ever to be brought to a successful conclusion, it could only be by the adoption by the Supreme Command of what it described as “Baxter methods.”

In his distant outpost, Bill, attracted perhaps by the memories which the name suggested—for even bores can arouse thoughts of home—had followed the rise of this impressive and much-boomed personage from its inception. Yet when at length a hideous photograph appeared to tell him that this was in truth his old acquaintance of the Corinthian Club and no other, it must be admitted that it found him quite unprepared for the shock. He had stared at the portrait in amazement, and it had struck him, very forcibly, that of all the extraordinary and unforeseen changes which had been brought about by the war, this was one of the most remarkable; and he discouraged himself considerably

by reflecting how he had presumed to judge this man by the faulty criterion of his manner and appearance, and resolved to be more careful in future.

And yet, when at last, whether by the adoption of Baxter methods or otherwise, the war did in fact reach its belated conclusion, and when a few months later Bill had been permitted to return to London and to make use once again of his subscription to the Corinthian Club, had he observed any outward change in the form of the victorious Baxter? Did he not, rather, appear to Bill and his surviving contemporaries more odious, insufferable, asinine, pompous and half-witted than he had five years before? To be perfectly fair to him, it must be admitted that he had by now acquired such an abounding store of conceit, that he no longer deigned to inflict his exasperating presence on the humbler members of the Club; but no one who heard him, as one could on occasion scarcely help doing, unburdening himself to those whom he considered worthy of this honour, could be under any illusion as to the existence of any genuine improvement in his character or his intellect.

During the months following the signing of the Armistice, there was added to the countless other queues which were then covering the face of the country, a procession of distinguished soldiers, lining up, whether willingly or not, for admission to limbo. Names which had but a few weeks before been in the mouths and newspapers of all, suddenly disappeared from both almost as completely as if they had never been. An autumn gale seemed to have scattered the golden oak-leaves which in the summer of the year 1918 had reached a profusion never before equalled in the world's history. Public interest, fixed for too long in the same direction, swung joyfully round to the exploits of prize-fighters, cocaine-fiends and other civilian heroes. But in spite of this, for the time being at any rate, the Baxter boom remained unaffected. Baxter himself was transferred from his post at the Horse Guards to a six-foot by four desk in the Demobilisation Directorate, from which he

was preparing, apparently, to take a leading part in what was in those days known as the Period of Reconstruction. Rumours were heard that he was on the point of standing for Parliament, that he was engaged on the supreme work on the inner history of the war, that he was to become the occupant of an important embassy, that he was to join the board of a big shipping trust. Meanwhile, he filled in his time by contributing a weekly article to a Sunday newspaper, in which the follies of the age were castigated with superb vigour and in succulent detail. In one week he achieved the signal honour of forming the subject of a question in the House of Commons and of a joke in a new Revue. Baxter stock was, in short, soaring.

And then, with the suddenness of all post-war slumps, the end had come. The first sign of it had reached Bill in the following manner. He was alone in the library at the Corinthian one evening, reading his newspaper and smoking his pipe. Suddenly the swing doors parted and the great Baxter entered. A few years earlier, Bill's instant action would have been to raise his paper to an unnatural height and to affect an intense absorption in its contents; but times had so changed that it did not even occur to him to do this now, and to his amazement, he found himself being addressed.

"Most infernal stupid thing," said the general, in his usual rather thick tones. "Government's gone mad. Country go to the devil. What?"

Bill made some nervous, non-committal sound, and Baxter flung himself into the chair by his side.

"Getting the whole place in a thundering mess," he growled. "Always coming along with their silly orders and regulations. Never know where you are."

Bill laid down his newspaper, and tried to look interested.

"Best feller I ever had under me," the general went on. "Had him with me ever since pore feller got hit. Eighteen months, I sh' think. Been invaluable to me. Absolutely inval'ble. Worth ten men any time. And what do they do? Never consult me. Oh, no,

Just come along with their damn-fool new scheme, and —(here he endeavoured to snap his fingers)—the man's gone. Never think of asking me. That's a fine way to run things, isn't it ? ”

“ Do you mean to say that they've been demobilising your staff ? ” asked Bill. Though it hardly struck him as unlike the way in which things were being done, there was, all the same, something rather amusing in the idea of some rival branch of the administration demobilising Baxter's underlings, while he was supposed to be demobilising the army in the field. Though he tried to stop it, some hint of his thoughts must have crept into his expression.

“ It's no laughing matter, sir,” said the general. “ I ask you, how are we to deal with all this Bolshevism and unrest, if this is the sort of thing that happens ? I'd come to depend on that man. You can't swap horses like that, y'know. I've a good mind—I've a good mind to——”

He broke off with a hoarse, military growl. Poor fellow, he had obviously no idea what he was going to do about his trouble. And yet, in a way, it struck Bill that he was taking an exaggerated view of the misfortune which had befallen him. Had not the whole lesson of the war been that no man was irreplaceable ?

“ But, surely——” he began, meaning, perhaps, to offer some comfort of this description.

But clearly he had taken the wrong line. General Baxter rose to his feet. “ Bah ! ” he roared, in a perfect frenzy of baffled rage, and the next moment he had turned and flung himself out of the library.

This extraordinary after-dinner interlude was, as has been said, the first sign which reached Bill of the approaching shadow which was on the point of obliterating the great Baxter. Never again did he offer his unsought confidences on this subject, and indeed for many months, even after he had resumed his old position as Club bore, he seemed purposely to avoid him, as if he felt some special reason for regretting his strange outburst.

However that may have been, the fact remains that

from the date of this interview General Baxter's relapse into obscurity went forward with the utmost rapidity. Without a syllable of explanation, his articles in the Sunday newspaper ceased, and his place was taken by a bombastic clergyman. In a scarcely less inexplicable access of economy or efficiency, the War Office suddenly put down the whole branch of which he had been the nominal head, and for a second time gazetted him out, this time with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. His name vanished from the columns of the journalistic gossips and diarists, his photograph was seen no more in the illustrated papers ; no longer did he or his doings form the subject of Parliamentary questions, and the joke about General Backstairs was suffered silently to disappear from the revue. Within the walls of the Corinthian Club, Colonel Baxter was still known and dreaded as an irremovable feature, but outside this limited area his fame had been as completely erased from the public memory as if he had never existed.

6

One can understand, therefore, the quickened interest which his visitor's confession of his former connection with this once famous character made Bill feel in the visitor himself. What if he should prove to be the actual indispensable, whose removal from General Baxter's personal staff had been almost, it seemed, the signal for his return to nonentity ? There might be an interesting story here, if the fellow cared to tell it.

And so, as they reached the street, he returned to the subject.

"Were you with Colonel Baxter long ?" he asked.

"A bit over a year," said the man in the raincoat.

"I wonder if you were the fellow he told me about, that they demobilised without telling him. He was in no end of a state about it at the Club one evening, I remember."

"I don't believe he liked losing me," said Austin Harvey. He gave a quick look at his companion, as if to see how much he knew, almost how much he thought.

"And I didn't do myself much good by leaving him, either," he went on at once, as though to interrupt some further question which he seemed to expect.

"Didn't you?" said Bill. "I should hardly have thought he was a man that one would want to spend very many years with."

Harvey smiled, possibly at the moderation of this opinion.

"I didn't exactly say I was sorry to go," he said. "In fact, to tell the truth, the very sight of him made me sick towards the end. Where I made the mistake, though, was in thinking that I could launch out on my own."

"Launch out as what?"

"As anything at all. No, I've tried my hand at more jobs than I care to think of during these last few years, but every time I was made to realise the same thing. It's a most humiliating confession to have to make," he went on, "but I'm afraid there's no doubt about it now."

"No doubt about what?" asked Bill.

"That I can't push myself in the way that I can push other people. Eh? You don't understand?" He shot one of his quick, appraising glances at Bill, and added suddenly:

"Are you an employer?"

"On a very small scale," said Bill. "Was the strange creature going to ask for a job now? If so, he could hardly have chosen a worse employer to approach. But no; apparently he wasn't."

"The scale doesn't matter," he said. "It's the attitude."

Bill was left guessing what, if anything, he meant by this remark, for he added nothing in explanation, and they covered the rest of the short distance in silence.

And then, at the very steps of the Corinthian, an impulse which had been hovering about him for some time, but which he was quite under the impression had just taken its final departure, suddenly returned with overwhelming force,

"Excuse my asking you," he said, "but are you looking for a job of any kind?"

"Yes," said the man in the raincoat.

"As anything particular?"

"Yes," he said again. "As a right-hand man. Do you want one?"

The rapid, eager question and the penetrating look with which it was accompanied, as nearly as possible made Bill answer, "Yes." But he just stopped himself in time.

"I'm afraid I could hardly run to one," was what he actually did say. "They're rather luxuries, aren't they?"

"It depends," said Harvey.

"But look here. If you leave me your address, it's always possible that I might hear of something. I only wish——"

"Oh, don't apologise," Harvey broke in. "I know you'll do what you can. Here you are."

He pulled an old envelope and a piece of pencil out of his pocket and scribbled his name and address. Then, apparently as an afterthought, he added the words, "Soda-water."

"That'll remind you who I am," he said. "Good-night."

And immediately he had turned, and the felt hat and raincoat were swallowed up in the crowd on the pavement.

Bill stood for a moment on the steps, staring after him. Ought he to have done something more? Ought he to have. . . . No, what more could he have done? You couldn't offer a fellow like that money. I mean to say . . . No, of course you couldn't.

He thrust the scrap of paper into his pocket, shrugged his shoulders, and passed on into the Club to join his partner.

II LESLIE

I

Isn't it strange that in the City of London, where thousands of more or less intelligent persons make their living almost entirely through their knowledge of the principles of Supply and Demand, no one should yet have succeeded in applying these principles to the problem of the mid-day meal? Every day that men meet together in offices, the cry goes up, "Tell me where I can get a decent lunch without being crushed to death," and every day the piteous question remains unanswered. And unanswered it must apparently continue to be, even if this unattainable standard of decency were abandoned. For not only is every kind of communal eating-house, from the most distinguished City club to the most stifling underground bar, full and flowing over for five days in every week, but the steady growth of Mammon is continually overwhelming even the inadequate accommodation that there is, and replacing it, slowly but relentlessly, with the marble and reinforced concrete of yet another bank or insurance office. Perhaps when, like Midas, the City has turned all its food into gold, it will be equally sorry. Meanwhile, unless you happen to occupy one of those luxurious places of business with its own kitchen and its own cellar, you will not need to be reminded how keen this mid-day struggle for existence is, and how far from keen the appetite which it produces.

When Bill Fraser first came to Pardon Court, he was duly proposed and seconded for the City Pentagon, and in four or five months he achieved the honour of membership. If there had been no war, he would probably

have been fighting his way into its dining-room still, but the war had proved too much for the City Pentagon. After struggling gamely through a sea of debentures, and emergency funds, and special guarantee bonds, and all the other troubles which mark the approaching wreck of a club, it had finally given up the contest and gone down with all hands. Bill had been able to make use of exactly six weeks of his membership, for which he had paid from first to last at the rate of rather over nine pounds a week, and when he came back to Pardon Court again, he somehow felt that he had had enough of City clubs.

So some days he went here and some days he went there, and some days he tried having lunch at twelve and some days he tried having lunch at three, and on other days, I am afraid, he tried having no lunch at all. And on the day following his twenty-ninth birthday he tried the Golden Griffin.

The entrance to the Golden Griffin, whatever it was like when its sign was first hoisted some four hundred years ago, must now be very like the entrance to Hell. A hot blast of cooking comes floating up an almost perpendicular staircase, the walls of which are decorated in vivid red and gold, and as you turn the first corner, a sullen roar which traces its source partly to the lunchers and partly to the ventilating apparatus, seems to sweep over you like the terrifying sound which fills your ears when you are being given chloroform. Indeed, by this time, what with this noise and the thickness of the atmosphere, you are already more than half anaesthetised, and it is on this general insusceptibility to all sensation which the management clearly relies in its extraordinary assumption that it is conducting a place of refreshment.

Bill went down the five flights of stairs—for the lift, as usual, was out of order,—resisted the blandishments of the young lady in the cloak-room and the other young lady at the tobacco-stall, and passed into the restaurant itself. To a less experienced eye the chance of ever obtaining a seat amid that forest of black coats would

have appeared faint indeed, and even Bill nearly turned round and came out again ; but the knowledge that he would find the same conditions prevailing everywhere else kept him among the little knot of watchful pouncers by the door, and in less than five minutes he had marked down a luncher who had already reached his cheese. Delicately and gingerly he edged towards him, and at the critical moment, even as the luncher rose to brush the crumbs from his swelling waistcoat, he slipped past him and had taken his seat. Thus it is that in the present century one begins one's lunch at the Golden Griffin.

He put his hat under his chair and craned his neck in all directions in search of the necessary waiter, and at this moment he became aware of a strange familiarity about the features of the man on his immediate right. A pleasant face it seemed, but yet hardly one to have attracted attention in the ordinary way. He gave quite half a dozen cautious, exploratory glances at it before the clouds which obscured his memory rolled away. Then, suddenly, he remembered. Of course ; it was Mr. Grahame. Even in his mind he gave him this formal prefix, for he had not set eyes on him since the age at which one applies it to all one's seniors ; but as soon as he had done so, he realised that he was wrong. He wasn't Grahame any longer. He was Lord—Lord something. Longhurst ? Longbridge ? No, he'd got it now. Lord Longwood.

What on earth was Lord Longwood doing in a place like the Golden Griffin ?

And just as he asked himself this unanswerable question, Lord Longwood turned towards him, and it was immediately apparent that he was in turn going through the agonies of a mental struggle to decide whether he knew his next-door-neighbour or not.

Bill decided to take steps.

" I'm afraid you don't remember me," he said.

" Of course I do," answered Lord Longwood. " Why, it's—yes, of course I do."

And quite clearly he did remember him ; all, that is, except his name.

"I'm Alexander Fraser," Bill announced helpfully. "The White House. You remember now, don't you?"

"Bill Fraser," said Lord Longwood, much relieved. "Of course. Of course."

They were jammed much too tightly against each other to dream of shaking hands, but they both made such appropriately sympathetic gestures as were possible.

"And how's—and how's——" Bill could see him remembering that his father and mother were dead.

"And how are you?" Lord Longwood concluded.

"Splendid," said Bill, with meaningless enthusiasm.

"This is a funny place to meet you," he went on. "You don't come here often, do you?"

"Never been here before," answered Lord Longwood.

"Shouldn't have come to-day, only my secretary's taken the day off, and I got my appointments a bit mixed. I say, does one ever get any food here?"

"Sometimes," said Bill. "Hi! Waiter!"

Lord Longwood joined in his cries, and they ordered the same lunch, in the hope that this would make it easier for the waiter to remember about it.

"You live in London now, don't you?" asked Bill, when this excitement had died down.

"Oh, no. I don't live here," Lord Longwood explained. "But I've taken a house in Brook Street for a bit."

Bill took this strange distinction to mean that he still regarded Hare Hall as his headquarters. Why he should feel pleased at this, he really hardly knew; except that it seemed the natural thing to feel, when he heard that one bit, at any rate, of the surroundings of his youth was still in its place. At one time he would have thought it as impossible for there to be no Frasers at the White House as for there to be no Grahames at Hare Hall, but he knew now that change was the rule, not the exception.

"Your brother's married, isn't he?" Lord Longwood asked after a pause.

"Yes. He married during the war."

"And you?"

"Oh, I'm not married," said Bill. He felt it incum-

bent on him to laugh as he said this, as if there were something fantastically humorous about the idea of his being married. And yet why should it be more intrinsically ridiculous in his case than in anyone else's? His laughter faded suddenly away.

"And you're still in Fraser's?" asked Lord Longwood.

"Still keeping the flag flying," said Bill.

"Ah." And now it was Lord Longwood who smiled. There probably did appear something slightly ludicrous to anyone in his position in the idea of these curious little businesses whose continuance was always more or less of a struggle. Yet his smile, also, gave place to a different look, as he said:

"I envy you in some ways, you know. It's a terrible responsibility doing things on a big scale nowadays. A terrible responsibility." And he seemed to cower for a moment before the vision of it.

"Everything is still so unsettled," he went on. "You can't trust people in the way you used to be able. You can't find men who'll work without being watched. There doesn't seem to be any—any stability about people in these days."

Bill had the feeling that all round the crowded restaurant the black-coated men were saying the same thing, as they had said it every day during these last years. But what did they or Lord Longwood expect? Ought one to take it for granted that alone of all created things human beings were to suffer action without reaction? Or was it one of humanity's more admirable limitations that it should always expect itself to rise superior to these natural laws?

But Lord Longwood was continuing.

"Do you remember Tidman?" he suddenly asked.

"Tidman? No, I——"

"My father's secretary."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

"I took him on when my father died," said Lord Longwood; "and I'm bound to say he's never given me anything to complain about. A thoroughly reliable man. And now, what do you think he's done?"

"What?" Bill obliged with the expected query.

"Handed in his notice and booked his passage to Canada."

There certainly was something about this action, when considered in conjunction with the Tidman whom Bill remembered, that seemed to justify Lord Longwood's tone of injured amazement.

"Why on earth did he do that?" he asked.

"Just what I said to him," replied Lord Longwood. "'My dear Tidman,' I said, 'why on earth do you want to do this?' And if you believe me, the only reason that he could give was that it was the war. 'But my dear Tidman,' I said, 'the war was over years ago.'"

"And what did he say to that?" asked Bill.

"Well, of course he couldn't say anything to that." Lord Longwood gave a reminiscent smile at the success of his repartee.

"Then he's not going?"

"I'm afraid he is, though. I never could have believed that fellow could be so obstinate."

Bill realised that some thought at the back of his mind was trying to connect itself with this conversation. A worrying kind of feeling, and, of course, nine times out of ten when one starts in pursuit, the thought flickers and vanishes. But there are exceptions, and this time he pounced quickly, and caught it.

"Are you looking for a new secretary?" he asked.

Lord Longwood glanced anxiously round to see whether he were being watched. The hunted expression of the potential employer came into his face, as he answered in a low voice:

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am."

"Would you object if I sent some one to see you?" asked Bill.

Having made his admission, it was difficult for Lord Longwood to say straight out that his objection to such a course would be intense and bitter. Nevertheless, he tried to temporise.

"What sort of a some one?" he asked.

"Ex-service man," said Bill. "Plenty of experience, I should say."

"As a private secretary?"

"I believe so. And as a right-hand man."

This phrase seemed to comfort and calm his lordship.

"A right-hand man," he repeated. "Well, that's really more how I should describe what I want myself. You know, Tidman took a very great deal of work off my shoulders, and it wouldn't be easy to replace him by the ordinary kind of secretary."

"Then may I tell my man to go and see you?"

"He'd better see Tidman," said Lord Longwood. "Yes, send him along to Brook Street by all means. Tell him to ring up first."

"Thanks very much," said Bill. "I have an idea he might suit you, but of course I shall quite understand if it doesn't come off."

Lord Longwood blinked graciously.

"We'll hope for the best," he said.

The conversation turned to other and more general matters. Views were exchanged on the political problems of the day. Vaguely by Lord Longwood, tentatively by Bill, and ignorantly by both. In fact, for the next twenty minutes or so, there was nothing to distinguish their talk from the talk of the rest of the smoky, overheated luncheon room. Several times, during the occasional pauses which arose, a close observer might have seen Bill Fraser draw in his breath as though he were going to ask a question; but whatever it was, it never came, and presently they were paying their bills, and wending their tortuous course towards the doorway, and finally mounting the stairs which led to the street.

At the top they both paused.

"Well, good-bye," said Lord Longwood. "I'm very glad to have met one of you Frasers again. It's too bad the way all one's old friends seem to disappear. Perhaps you'll come and see us one day soon. I'll get Leslie to ask you."

"Oh, thanks awfully," said Bill. "Yes, of course, I'd . . . Of course."

"A week-end, perhaps?"

"That would be delightful."

"Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye."

They shook hands, and Lord Longwood disappeared into a taxi, while Bill walked slowly back towards Pardon Court, staring aimlessly into shop windows, and escaping the traffic at the various crossings purely by the intervention of Providence.

Wasn't it ridiculous, he was thinking, wasn't it pitiful that anyone could carry self-consciousness to such a shameful degree? Why couldn't he have said, in an ordinary, casual tone of voice, "And how is Leslie?" and have got it over?

Of course there was an explanation; there is an explanation of some sort, presumably, for most things; but how childishly inadequate this one was. Simply that seventeen or eighteen years ago he and Leslie, during one of her periodical visits to her grandfather's, had entered into an absurd compact to get married. The engagement, which, he remembered with a smile, had been made entirely at Leslie's suggestion, had lasted for less than the length of one of his summer holidays, for the next time they met she had announced that she was Robin Hood, and he had accepted this as an intimation that the previous arrangement was off. Yet it had been a good game while it lasted. They had planned to take up their residence in the little thatched summer-house in the garden of Hare Hall, and he could remember still a terrible and sanguinary battle in which he had engaged with Maurice, provoked by Maurice's intolerable assertion that this summer-house was really a wireless station, and belonged to him. In the ordinary way there would have been undoubted attractions about this scientific alternative, but as things were, the only possible course of action had been to fling himself in a fury at Maurice's person. The end of the battle was less clear in his memory, but it seemed unlikely that he

could have obtained any lasting advantage after the surprise of his first onslaught.

Yet what had there been, after all, to differentiate this game of setting up house from all the other games of Roundheads and Cavaliers, and Greeks and Trojans, and Catholics and Huguenots, which had kept the three of them occupied during those distant summers? Nothing. That is, nothing at the time. But enough, apparently, to cause him, seventeen years afterwards, to behave in this contemptible manner when he again met Leslie's father.

Yes, contemptible was the word. Self-conscious idiot; would anyone else on the face of the earth have let this memory silence an ordinary, harmless question about a young woman's health? No, of course they wouldn't.

Ass!

And Leslie must be twenty-four now; perhaps getting on for twenty-five.

He wondered what she was like. And he wondered if they would really ask him down for the week-end. If he went, he would see the White House again. Good Lord! what centuries ago it all seemed.

Frowning gently, he turned into Pardon Court, climbed the stairs which led to his office, flung his hat on to its usual chair, and sat down to write to the soda-water man.

2

That evening he dined, as arranged, with Maurice and Beatrix at their house in Kensington.

There was a certain ritual about these occasions which served to distinguish them from other dinner parties. In the first place, it was Bill's practice to arrive approximately an hour and a quarter before the time for which he had been invited. Neither his host nor his hostess had ever raised any objection to this custom, and indeed, since he did not trouble them in any way until the official dinner hour, there was very little reason why they should.

For when the front door was opened, Bill would waste no time in asking whether Mrs. Fraser were in. He merely smiled in a confidential manner at the parlour-maid, and she smiled in a no less sympathetic manner at him. Having accomplished this much, he would hand her his hat and coat, and go very quietly up three flights of stairs. At the top of these three flights there was a curious little gate, with a concealed catch, but as Bill had long ago learnt its secret, he was quickly inside the fortifications.

His next move was to knock, always with the same unvarying and peculiar rhythm, on a door which faced the little gate. Then, if he were very quiet, he could hear through the closed door a sound resembling a subdued and gurgling kind of laugh, and taking this as permission to enter, he would do so, and immediately find himself in the presence of Sylvia.

Sylvia would be sitting in a strangely high chair, which had been drawn up to a table. Her visible attire usually consisted of a red flannel dressing-gown and red felt slippers, and she would be occupied in the assimilation of a light supper consisting of milk and Marie biscuits. To-night, when she sees Bill, she gurgles again and twists the red felt slippers round the bars of the chair with an ecstatic movement which he finds singularly encouraging.

Sylvia's attendant and Sylvia's uncle then exchange further sympathetic smiles, and the attendant withdraws, though not without a reminder as to the duration of the audience. Both Sylvia and Bill hasten to assure this attendant that they will faithfully observe her time limit, but while the latter always sets a splendid example of resignation and self-control when the final moment comes, as much cannot invariably be said for his niece, though she has been known to fall asleep in the attendant's arms in the very midst of her protests.

Now that they are alone together at last, the creature in the red flannel dressing-gown returns to the leisurely and slightly messy discussion of her evening meal, while Bill, settling himself on a low but comfortable chair on

the opposite side of the table, takes up the thread of the colossal serial story on which he has been engaged ever since he was first permitted to attend these receptions. This story has from the beginning always taken the form of a fantastic autobiography, and for some reason or other convention insists that the adventures with which he describes himself as having met should always have taken place during the day on which he recounts them. Thus it is that the formula at whose command the serial is resumed is always the same.

"Tell me what you did to-day, Bill," says Sylvia.

(This is how nieces address their bachelor uncles nowadays.)

"Well," Bill begins, hastily gathering his thoughts together, "as I took my ticket on the Underground this morning, what do you think I saw just in front of me?"

"Oh, what was it?" asks Sylvia, already squirming with anticipation, while her uncle tries quickly to make up his mind whether it was a witch, or a dragon, or a white cat.

"It was a young man," he finally announces.

Sylvia knows that this will be no ordinary young man, so she shows no sign of disappointment at this unpromising opening, but merely gives another wriggle.

"Yes," says Bill, gathering speed now. "And the odd thing about him was that he was carrying a most curious-looking hat, with a green feather in it—under his arm."

"Not on his head?" asks Sylvia, just as she is meant to ask.

"No," replies Bill; and then comes the explanation. Needless to say, as chance would have it, he had got into the same carriage with the young man, and the young man had there confided in him that his apparent eccentricity was due to his being in possession of the cap of invisibility, which would, of course, have prevented Bill or anyone else from seeing him if he had worn it in the ordinary way. Encouraged by his new acquaintance's reception of this intelligence, the young man had added the information that he was in search of a Princess,

and that he was also, unfortunately, being pursued by an ogre.

At this point Bill really got going. He had naturally been anxious to assist the young man (whose name, by the way, was Conrad, but who is understood to have had no connection with the well-known novelist) in the difficulty in which he found himself, and as the young man seemed singularly lacking in common sense and initiative, he was able to make a number of very valuable suggestions as to the uses to which the magic cap might be put. Conrad had been more than ready to fall in with these ideas, and a fine time they had had of it, all round the Inner Circle. Sometimes Conrad had worn the cap and sometimes, which was even more thrilling, Bill had.

A series of indescribably exciting adventures had followed, which might have lasted still longer, if there had not been sounds from without as of the return of the nurse. Bill leapt hastily to his climax. The ogre stepped off the escalator with the wrong foot first and was instantly killed, and at the same moment (according to Bill) he had had the good fortune to recognise no less a dignitary than the Bishop of London waiting on the platform. Would he, Bill had asked, be good enough, for his sake, to marry Conrad and the Princess at once, as he was already rather late for his office? Nothing, apparently, would give the good Bishop more pleasure. They had all adjourned instantly to the nearest City church, and the happy couple had already been got safely into a taxicab on their way to the bride's palace, when the nursery door again opened, and niece and uncle both realised that the end had come.

"And what happened then?" asked Sylvia, with a last attempt to prolong the evening's instalment.

"That's all that happened to-day," said Bill firmly, and he was rewarded with an approving, if slightly patronising smile from the nurse.

"But more happened another day?" suggested Sylvia.

"Oh, yes. Lots more. Only it hasn't happened yet, you see."

While Sylvia was still thinking this over, the nurse interposed.

"Now say good-night to your uncle like a good girl," she commanded.

Sylvia threw him a ravishing look.

"Good-night, darling Bill," she said.

The nurse, as usual, pretended to look shocked, but Mr. Fraser didn't seem to mind.

"Good-night, darling Sylvia," he answered.

An embrace followed. Sylvia's contribution was about fifty per cent. baby and fifty per cent. biscuit, but Bill wouldn't have missed it for anything.

And so she was picked up and carried away, while he, according to his customary practice, went downstairs again; but still not to trouble his host or hostess with his presence. For Beatrix had yet to pay her own good-night visit to her daughter before dressing, and as for Maurice, when one is getting on at the Bar as well as he was, one doesn't get home to one's family with much, if indeed any time to spare before dinner.

Bill found his way into the drawing-room and took up the evening newspaper which Beatrix never wanted and Maurice never had time to read, and set himself to acquiring an up-to-date knowledge of the world's news. This, on this particular evening, seemed to consist principally of some mysterious intelligence about an anti-cyclone, set off by a rapturous description of a close finish at the Oval. In other words, there was no news; but bachelors know how to make the most of their evening newspapers, and he was still, half an hour later, contentedly digesting a column of pointless repartees from the police courts, when he heard sounds from below as of the return of the master of the house. Beatrix must have been on the alert upstairs for the same sounds, for he heard her almost immediately calling down.

"Is that you, Maurice?" Her voice was at the same time lowered, so as not to wake Sylvia, and yet reinforced, so as to reach her husband. It is hard to say exactly how Beatrix managed this, but it is a gift

which nice women seem to acquire when they become wives and mothers.

"Hullo. Yes, darling?" That was Maurice from below.

This question and reply must have conveyed more than would superficially appear, for the next thing that Bill heard was a creaking on the stairs, and then, apparently, husband and wife met on the landing outside the drawing-room. There was a sound of kissing, and he realised that the door must be ajar. Well, if they were going to choose this place to become unduly confidential, he would cough or rustle his newspaper. Meanwhile it seemed best to leave them to themselves.

"Are you very tired, my pet?" Beatrix was asking.

Bill thought of Maurice, and particularly of Maurice in Court, and smiled; and then he thought of Beatrix, and his smile changed.

"No, not a bit," Maurice was saying. "At least, I shan't be after dinner. Is Bill here yet?"

"Yes. He's been with Sylvia. I think he's downstairs in your room."

This, perhaps, was the moment for Bill's cough, but while he was still hesitating, Beatrix had gone on again.

"Maurice," she was saying, "I heard something so nice to-day."

"What, darling?"

"Only I promised not to tell anyone, so of course if you hear anything from anybody else, you must pretend to be terribly surprised."

Not a protest from Maurice. Was this, Bill wondered, what marriage had made of two people whom up till now he had thought incapable of dishonesty or deception? Apparently it was. He was so aghast, that he had no longer the breath to cough, and before he had recovered himself, it was too late. Beatrix was in the middle of her story, and the only thing to do was to stay where he was.

". . . . I think she was sorry that she'd said anything," Beatrix was saying, "and afterwards at the end

she came up to me again and made me swear to forget all about it."

"Yes, but what *did* she say?" Beatrix's oath clearly meant no more to Maurice than it did to herself. Where the interests of the firm were concerned, honour was as naught.

"Well, when I was introduced to her," the first conspirator continued, "I remembered at once that she was a kind of relation of his; so I thought I'd ask her if she'd heard how poor old Rowlandson was getting on."

"Well?" Maurice was obviously so far as much mystified as was Bill himself. There was, Bill knew, a King's Counsel or a judge or something of that sort called Rowlandson, but this alone would hardly account for Beatrix's excitement.

"Well," she went on, "she said that nobody knew yet, but as a matter of fact he couldn't possibly recover, and he was going to resign."

Her voice was positively ghoulish as she said this. Who could have believed it of the gentle, the sympathetic Beatrix?

"Poor old devil," said Maurice; but to Bill, in his shattered condition, his tones seemed to ring false.

"Yes, darling," continued Beatrix; "and then she said that there were only two men for the job; you and Sellars-Clarke."

"Yes?" Maurice's interest had been gripped at last.

"Well, don't you see? If Sellars-Clarke is abroad on that arbitration when Rowlandson resigns, they're almost bound to offer it to you."

"Oh, no, they're not." But it was clear that Maurice thought they might.

"Darling! You'd be the youngest Recorder in England. I've looked it up. I should be so proud."

"Oh, rot! Besides, she probably didn't know what she was talking about." Maurice seemed to be trying hard to hide his pleasure; not with any great success.

"But, darling. The Lord Chancellor's wife! Of course she knows *everything*!"

And Bill, sitting alone in the drawing-room, felt convinced that if Beatrix were the Lord Chancellor's wife, as he had no doubt that she one day would be, she would certainly know everything.

"You precious idiot," said Maurice. "It's a Home Office appointment. Didn't you know that?"

"I don't care. You'll see. You'll get it."

"Bosh."

Again there was a sound of kissing, and then together they went upstairs—Beatrix, presumably, to finish her dressing, and Maurice to carry out the busy man's substitute for this process. His smoking-jackets had for long been his younger brother's envy and admiration.

Bill tried to return to his newspaper, but it was no good. He flung it away in disgust, and then (remembering where he was) picked it up carefully and put it back on the table.

Why should some people have lovely, charming wives, who met them with kisses when they came back from their work, and imperilled their souls so as to provide them with cheering news, and supplied them with adorable soft babies in red flannel dressing-gowns; while other people lived by themselves in flats, and were sent out by their housekeepers to buy the soda-water?

He wasn't really himself again until quite half-way through dinner.

3

It was nearly a week later that Bill, returning one evening to Regency House, found two letters waiting for him on his sitting-room table, each addressed in an unfamiliar handwriting, and each bearing a London postmark.

"*Dear Fraser,*" said the first one that he opened, "*I apologise for not answering yours of last Friday before. The fact is that I was waiting to tell you the result of your efforts on my behalf, which I am now glad to say that I am able to do. Everything has been fixed up satisfactorily, and I shall take over from Lord Longwood's present*

secretary at once. This ought to be just the sort of job to suit me, and I hope we shall soon be making things hum. Many thanks again; you have done more for me over this than I expect you realise.

*"Yours sincerely
"Austin Harvey."*

Bill read this letter three times. First hastily, then critically, and the third time with a sudden feeling of panic. What on earth, he asked himself, as the paper fluttered from his hand, had he been and gone and done now?

On Thursday evening he had met a man in a wine-shop, whom he had never seen before in his life and about whom he knew nothing, unless one were to allow a possible connection between him and the Corinthian Club bore. At lunch time on the following day he had gone out of his way to recommend this complete stranger to fill a responsible and confidential post in the establishment of a man whom he hadn't seen for well over ten years, and about whose habits and requirements he was completely ignorant. So far he had merely been an inconsiderate busybody; but what did he become when the appointment which he had lightly suggested had been actually made? An awkward question, this.

He tried to comfort himself by reflecting that the selection of Lord Longwood's new secretary had, after all, been made by the departing Tidman. There had been no compulsion on Tidman to approve this particular nominee. If it came to that, Lord Longwood might have put an advertisement in the newspapers and still have found himself saddled with this Harvey fellow, without any interposition on Bill's part at all. He imagined himself adopting these arguments when the new secretary should have admitted a gang of burglars into the house in Brook Street and he were called upon for an explanation, and, to tell the truth, he didn't seem to see them meeting with much success. Something really ought to be done about people who, at his age, could go and do such an unnecessarily silly thing as this.

And yet, when he recalled the look of the man as he had stood last week in this very room, one couldn't help being impressed by him. Surely he had had enough experience by now to know an out and out impostor when he saw one. Or had he only been waiting for a clever enough rogue to come along, to be deceived as completely as the most gullible Labour Exchange?

There was certainly nothing to complain of about the letter itself, except for that rather alarming reference to making things hum. A private secretary who made things hum, and whose intention it apparently was that his employer should join him in this recreation, would be, it seemed to Bill, the last kind of private secretary that Lord Longwood would want.

This, he told himself with some annoyance, was what came of trying to help people.

Yet the thing was settled now, and it wouldn't be improving matters to follow up his original recommendation by filling Lord Longwood's ears with belated and quite probably unjustifiable suspicions.

He turned to the second envelope.

"Dear Mr. Fraser,

"My father has asked me to say that he would be so pleased if you could come down to Hare Hall for the week-end beginning on the 28th. If you are free, will you let me know what train you are coming by and we will meet you at Wordingham.

"Yours sincerely

"Leslie Grahame."

Perhaps it was the ruffled condition into which Harvey's letter had thrown him, which made Bill instantly begin picking holes in this second communication. At any rate he did; and very unreasonable holes they were. For after all, when a young woman hasn't seen a young man since the days when he was a comparative and she was a positive child, must she necessarily write to him as "Dear Bill"? One wouldn't have thought so. But Bill didn't or wouldn't see this.

All he knew was that for the best part of a week he had been thinking of an imaginary personification by her Christian name, and that it came as a distinct, even though ridiculous rebuff, to find that the personification had been thinking of him as Mr. Fraser. And having got thus far, it was but a step to find fault with the opening words of the letter. Why would only her father be pleased if he came? Why couldn't she say that she would be pleased too?

From these evil constructions of his own imagination he began to picture an appalling type of conceited nouveau-riche heiress, whom it would be his duty, his regrettable duty to snub. (N.B. Bill had never snubbed anybody in his life.) He even, standing there beneath the sitting-room lamp, built up a wonderful scene in which he was to tell Miss Grahame—if that was what she wanted to be called—that he was quite unable to recall the incidents of their early days of which she had been trying to remind him. And then, when he had extracted the last ounce of enjoyment out of these visions, he sat down and accepted the invitation. He wrote to Dear Miss Grahame, in fact, and said that he should look forward very much to seeing Hare Hall again, and that he would be arriving at Wordingham station by the 5.40 train. And having nothing else particular to look forward to for the next three weeks, or indeed the next three years if it came to that, he began looking forward to this approaching return to the scenes of his youth, and, as was his simple custom, he presently confided his anticipations to his brother and his partner.

Maurice said: "Find out who is living at the White House now, and what they'll take to clear out. I mean to get that place again sooner or later."

"Oh," said Bill. "All right. Yes. Certainly."

Maurice himself, of course, would have thought nothing of calling on a set of entire strangers and asking them the price of their home, and the chances would have been that before he left, they would have named a figure. Bill didn't see himself going quite as far as

this, but he undertook to make what enquiries he could. There was no immediate point in his confessing that he also had had dreams of regaining possession of the White House, for in his own case the idea was so obviously impracticable, and brothers, as is well-known, have a horrid habit of laughing at one. Besides, the Cattersons were probably still there, and with every intention of remaining.

George Lucas received the intelligence in his own characteristic manner. That is to say, that his only immediate comment was the word "Ha!" uttered in a loud and uninterested tone. But about ten minutes later, having spent the interval in deep thought, he suddenly added:

"You'd better marry the daughter. There's lots of money there, I should think."

Of course the dignified thing would have been to treat this mercenary suggestion with the silent contempt which it deserved. But where is the man who would not have risen, as Bill instantly rose?

"I haven't the faintest intention of marrying the daughter," he said.

George's opening was almost too easy.

"Well, I don't suppose she'd have you," he answered.

Bill made a last, belated attempt to recapture his dignity, but the task was hopeless.

"I wish to goodness, George," he broke out, "that you'd ever let me go anywhere or see anyone without everlastingly talking about marriage. If you're so infernally keen on it, why don't you get married yourself? Heaven knows you're ugly enough."

One may seek in vain for any logical process at work behind this outburst. It is sheer waste of time to ponder on the connection between George's ugliness and George's marriageability, for none existed. Bill had only seized on the first means at hand to emphasise his annoyance at this ridiculous and unnecessary suggestion, and in such circumstances logic could, in his opinion, jolly well look after itself.

George, however, merely continued to beam through his spectacles.

"A palpable hit," he remarked.

And Bill was left guessing to which of their efforts he was referring, and also to suffer certain undisclosed pangs of remorse, because, after all, it is hardly fair to twit ex-black-sheep on the grounds of their celibacy. Perhaps George was remorseful too. At any rate, it was he who at this point introduced the uncontroversial subject of the Bank Rate, on which they could both work off any remaining exasperation in complete agreement.

And so, at length, the Saturday of the invitation arrived, and we find Bill, with his suit-case safely bestowed in a taxi, rapidly approaching Charing Cross station. Already there is a set look about his expression, which indicates that he has braced himself to meet the inevitable shocks which are entailed by a journey into one's own past. He flatters himself that he is prepared for anything, but there is no point in being off one's guard. He is ready to find that Hare Hall and his old home and the whole surrounding country have diminished by forty per cent. in size since he last saw them, but he will face this like a man. If he is lucky enough to discover anything unchanged, he will be grateful; if not, he will be resigned. And above all, whatever the provocation, he will on no account become vocally reminiscent. That he has sworn.

There was no change about the beginning of the journey. The South-Eastern Railway still adopted its unique and hesitating manner of leaving London; the train paid its customary visit to Cannon Street, and crossed the river three times before it eventually got going. But at last it was fairly under way. Look, there was the Crystal Palace. Bless its dear old heart! In spite of all his good resolutions, he found his excitement growing.

But there was plenty of time in which to go through rapidly recurring phases of exhilaration, depression and

calm, before the train reached the tunnel which, as he knew, heralded the arrival of Wordingham station. First the tunnel, then the cutting with the foot-bridge, then the goods sidings, and then, yes, here it was, the station itself. A porter appeared outside the carriage window, shouting the traditional sound which was supposed to represent "Wordingham," and Bill looked eagerly at him, already prepared to be pleased or saddened, according to whether he could remember his face or not. The disappointing thing was that, after all, he couldn't be certain. The porter looked so like other porters, and, more unfortunately still, had taken this scrutiny of his features to imply that his services were required. He broke off in the midst of his recitation and opened the carriage door. Bother! This would mean sixpence at least.

"Anything in the van, sir?" asked the porter.

"No," said Bill. "I think there's a motor to meet me. From Hare Hall."

The porter was visibly impressed. He would probably expect a shilling now.

"This way, sir," he said.

Bill gave up half his third-class ticket and followed him through the booking hall. Outside there was an enormous, black limousine, with a coat of arms on the panel of the door. The porter seemed to recognise it, for he handed the suit-case to the chauffeur without a word. The chauffeur touched his cap. Bill half-thought of saying, "Good-afternoon," but it would be terrible if the chauffeur didn't answer, so he said nothing. Instead, he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out his loose change.

This was unlucky. Three half-crowns and two pennies. And all the porter had done was to carry one small suit-case perhaps twenty yards. Three halfpence a yard that was, for one couldn't offer him twopence in these days, and one couldn't, or at least he couldn't ask for change with the chauffeur watching him all the time.

"Thank *you*, sir," said the porter.

"I suppose he thinks I'm a profiteer," thought Bill, a little ruffled. "This comes of visiting millionaires."

The limousine moved slowly away, and then, driving the thought of the porter and everything else out of his head, came the first of the unexpected shocks. A large, vermilion omnibus, twin sister to the thousands which he had left behind in London, ground majestically past the station entrance. All his good resolutions were instantly forgotten. A motor-omnibus in Wordingham High Street! How perfectly and absolutely intolerable. Was it for this that England had won the war?

The limousine was gathering speed now, and hardly had the omnibus passed out of sight when a fresh horror burst on his eyes. Right opposite the town-hall, too. "Wordingham Picturedrome de Luxe" indeed! Was that the kind of thing that his absence had encouraged? There had been an almost perfect Georgian house there before; he could remember it well. How could such things be allowed?

But once outside the little town, he had a chance to recover himself. The outskirts of Wordingham had never been beautiful, but the war had prevented them from spreading; and presently he was comforted by coming on the mysterious galvanised-iron chapel, which had shown no single sign of life during all the years that he had known it, and now still stood, embowered as ever in nettles, but otherwise defying the ravages of time. The carrier's cart, too, which was drawn up outside the Barley Mow at Sticklebridge, might have looked the same even fifty years ago, but for the tell-tale advertisement of motor spirit that was pasted on its hood. He let himself be consoled. Perhaps the heart of the country was still really sound.

There was a temporary relapse into modernity as the car flashed through a group of half-built villas, but after this, subject to the general reduction in scale which he had anticipated, there was no more to complain of. The old black barn near the bottom of the hill, its roadward end plastered as ever with notices concerning wild birds and swine fever, was, as it had been in the days

of the White House's first and only car, the signal for changing into second speed. But the big limousine rushed up the incline in a way which that four-cylinder pioneer had never attempted, and almost before he could realise what had happened, it had dashed through the lodge gates, swung up the short, twisting drive, and stopped before the front door.

A strange butler, with a silver ex-service badge in the silk lapel of his coat, appeared and opened the door of the car. Bill pulled himself together and got out. And then, as he passed through the little entrance hall, there was wafted out to him from the cloak-room on the right, a faint yet familiar scent of Harris tweed, and for a moment the years since he had last been in this house had suddenly rolled away. Is there anything, one wonders, like the human nose for playing these tricks with one's memory. An all-but-forgotten tune can do a good deal, it is true; but for the sheer illusion which can set time at defiance, commend me to the all-but-forgotten smell.

Bill would have liked to prolong this moment by taking another sniff, but already the butler was waiting for him by the inner door. As he drew level with him again, he murmured something about going and telling somebody, and disappeared. Bill found himself alone in the big, low-ceilinged hall.

He became conscious that somebody was playing the piano in what used to be, and probably still was, the drawing-room. It sounded rather like Chopin. But while he was still trying to decide whether it were real Chopin, or only a Chopinesque improvisation, the music ceased. Through the open door there came the sound of footsteps on the parquet; they drew nearer, and the next moment he was being greeted by Mr. Austin Harvey.

"Hullo," he was saying. "I thought I heard some one."

"Hullo," said Bill. In all his imaginings about his coming visit to Hare Hall, he had probably pictured every kind of reception except this. And yet, why

shouldn't Lord Longwood have his private secretary down here, if he wanted to ? He dismissed his unreasonable feeling of displeasure.

"How are you ?" he added.

"Splendid," said the new secretary. "Lord Longwood's coming down by the next train," he went on. "The others are playing tennis. Have you had tea ?"

"Yes, thanks," said Bill. He hadn't really, but it was six o'clock, and he didn't particularly want to have it by himself.

"Then shall we come out ?" suggested Harvey.

"Yes. Let's."

Bill followed him through the drawing-room, out of the French windows, and across the terrace, yielding his keys to the returning butler on the way. At the bottom of the terrace steps he tried to go to the right, to where the old grass courts used to be, but Harvey stopped him.

"This way," he said, and he led him along the path to the left, towards a door, which in Bill's time had opened on to a kind of desert at the back of the stables. But the desert had vanished. In its place a high wire cage enclosed a smooth, brick-red rectangle. The whole space had been given over to two hard courts. At the far end of the cage two young women were engaged in a furious single.

Harvey and Bill crept stealthily round the edge, so as not to distract their attention. Harder and harder the ball went swooping backwards and forwards over the net, until suddenly, one of the players, with a super-human mis-hit, skied it right out of the ground.

"Yow !" she yelled, as it flew away ; and then, "Deuce again. Curse you, Leslie !"

So the other one was Leslie.

Bill wondered if he would have guessed. She wasn't the least like what he had imagined. She was more—— But the creature of his imagination had already evaporated, and he was left without a basis of comparison. A little breathless, for some reason, too.

She had caught sight of him through the netting.

"Hullo, Bill!" she called out, waving her racquet in the air.

Bill, mark you. Why shouldn't he say, "Hullo Leslie!"? He would.

He did.

"Sit down while we finish the set," she went on. "I'll shake hands with you afterwards."

So Bill and Harvey found their way to a teak bench, and the battle reopened. Leslie won the next two points easily.

"Five all," she announced. "Sudden death?"

"Oh, rather," said her opponent.

Bill suddenly became passionately keen for Leslie to win this last game. But she didn't. She lost every point, and her defeat was signalled by barbaric cries of triumph from the other side of the net.

"Now, then," said Leslie, and she led the way to the door of the cage. Bill found himself shaking hands.

"Now I'll introduce you all," she went on. "This is Mr. Fraser. Mr. Harvey you know, don't you? And this is Miss Lorden."

This, at least, was what she actually said. But Bill was no exception to the common rule which makes otherwise intelligent people incapable of listening to introductions. He didn't really discover Angela Lorden's name until the Sunday afternoon, when, driven desperate by the fact that Leslie called her "Wog," and everybody else called her "you," he took Harvey aside and got the thing straight at last.

They stood discussing the game for a minute or two, and then Leslie said:

"Now, then, Wog; what about your luggage?"

"Well, Leslie darling, I'm sure it started with me. But I swear it wasn't there when we arrived. I had the whole train searched."

"Was it labelled?" asked Harvey.

"It was all over labels," said Wog. "That was just what was wrong with it, I think."

"Was it locked?" he went on.

"No, it wasn't locked," said Wog, thinking hard.
"But I've got the key," she added hopefully.

"Pull yourself together, Wog," said Leslie. "Did you ever have a box at all?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then it's at the junction. I suppose you didn't think of looking for it when you changed?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Leslie."

"No, you're not. And, what's more, I believe you did it on purpose, so that you could wear my clothes."

"But they're so much nicer than my own," Wog protested. "Aren't they, Mr. Fraser?" she added, turning to Bill.

Bill was spared the difficulty of answering, for Leslie broke in.

"That's enough," she said. "Now I'll tell you what you've got to do. Mr. Harvey will drive you over to the junction in the two-seater, and he'll find your box for you and see that you bring it back."

Wog looked doubtfully at her suggested escort.

"Do you know the way?" she asked.

"Not yet," said Harvey.

This seemed to encourage her. The thing was to be an adventure after all.

"Come on, then," she said.

"Mr. Harvey!" Leslie called after them, as they started towards the stables.

"Yes?"

"You're not to let her drive. Not even if she goes on her knees."

"Beast!" shouted Wog. And they disappeared.

"Now, then," said Leslie, turning to Bill. "Shall we go and look round?"

This, of course, was what he was longing to do, and he said so.

"Well, bring my racquet, then," she ordered.

He picked it up and followed her.

5

As he moved forward to open the door back into the garden, she suddenly stopped.

"What's this tune called?" she asked. And she hummed what one might judge to be about six bars of some kind of dance music.

Words can hardly describe the desire which Bill felt to be able to answer her question. But the days had long since passed when it had been the natural thing to keep abreast of popular songs. He had to confess his ignorance.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid I don't know it."

Perhaps he had taken her too seriously. At any rate she smiled.

"Oh, it doesn't matter as much as all that," she said. And then, as if to take his mind off his failure: "I say, shall we go and look at the White House?"

"I'd love to," said Bill. "But what about——"

"What?"

"I mean, who is living there now? Will they mind?"

"It's empty," said Leslie. "Papa bought it, you know. But he can't find any one to take it. At least, not any one that he likes."

It seemed almost too easy for Maurice, and yet Bill was unreasonable enough to hope that Lord Longwood was holding out for a stiff price. Even the original dog may have had sentimental reasons for wanting that manger.

They left the garden and took the footpath across the two fields. Bill was prepared to find desolation on the other side; straggling hedges and weed-covered paths; but as they drew nearer, he saw that there was nothing apart from the curtainless windows to show that the place was unoccupied. The garden, indeed, looked considerably tidier than it had been when he lived there, and the house must have been quite recently white-washed. On this sunny evening, the whole thing took on the air of a dream. Almost he could imagine that the next moment he would see smoke curling from the

kitchen chimney ; look again, perhaps, and find that he had been wrong about those windows. As they reached the lawn, he had a feeling that the slightest intangible obstacle had only to be broken down, and the years would in very fact have dropped away. A ghostly feeling. Comforting, yet vaguely disquieting.

He was recalled by Leslie's voice at his side.

"Bother!" she was saying. "I've gone and forgotten the keys."

"What? Oh, never mind the keys."

"But you'd like to go in, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course. But——"

"I know what," she interrupted. "If you can climb up on the porch, you can open that window and let me in at the back door."

There was that in her voice which commanded him to make the attempt, however much he might doubt his capabilities as an amateur housebreaker.

"Right you are," he said ; and, dropping the tennis racquet, he took a flying leap at one of the wooden pillars which stood on each side of the miniature portico. He was conscious of encouraging cries from below, as he finally toppled over the edge on to the lead roof.

"What about the window?" asked Leslie, standing on tip-toe.

"That's all right," he called down, as he saw that the catch was unfastened. "I won't be a minute now."

He stooped down and pulled up the sash, and the next instant he found himself in his father's old dressing-room. Some infernal people, presumably the Cattersons, had gone and re-papered it. And whether through rage at this discovery, or as a result of his recent exertions, or owing to a kind of indefinable excitement which had been growing on him ever since his arrival, he found his heart beating violently and uncontrollably. He had to steady himself for a second against the wall. But only for a second. The next moment he had dashed out of the room, through the baize-covered door at the end of the passage, and was clattering down the back-stairs. The ground floor was darkened by closed

shutters, but he could have found his way blindfold. The key was in the back door, and turned easily. He shot back the bolts and flung it open.

"Is Mr. Alexander Fraser at home?" asked Leslie.

"He only wishes he were, miss," said Bill. For a moment he thought he might have to explain, and wished devoutly that he had said something else. But Leslie threw him a quick look of understanding.

"Perhaps he would let me look over the house?" she said.

She didn't wait for him to carry the game any further, but slipped in past him, and he followed her along the passage. In the hall he found her waiting by the foot of the stairs.

"Do you remember the avalanche?" she asked.

"The avalanche? Oh, yes. Rather." He began to laugh.

How many years was it, he wondered, since that historic wet afternoon when Leslie had come over to tea, and they had all taken advantage of his parents' absence to indulge in mountaineering on the front stairs? It had been the visitor's idea to hurl the hot-water cans from the bathroom at Maurice and himself, as they made their arduous ascent. The realism of the scene had been tremendous; the mess, indescribable; but punishment, in spite of a full and frank confession from the instigator of the avalanche, had fallen entirely on the brothers Fraser. For nursery justice is ever rough and wild, and never more so than when some one comes to tea.

"There ought to be a damaged banister somewhere," said Bill, peering about for it.

"I'm sorry," Leslie apologised. "I'm afraid it's been mended."

"Oh, well; never mind."

But he did mind, rather.

They went on again into the drawing-room, into the dining-room, into what had been Robert Fraser's study, and so up the back-stairs again to the bedrooms. In his father's dressing-room he moved across to the window and began to shut it, but Leslie stopped him,

"You'll have to get out again that way," she reminded him.

All the time, as they went from room to room, Bill had the feeling that if only he could move quickly enough, if only he could, as it were, take some part of the house by surprise, he must find something which he wanted and yet feared to find. An uneasy kind of feeling, which made him linger by himself, and then come darting after Leslie, so that they were continually becoming separated and then meeting each other again, and taking up little snatches of interrupted reminiscence.

"Which was your room?" she asked, as they reached the attic floor.

"In here," said Bill, now leading the way; and a moment later: "I say. Look here." He was pointing to an almost invisible hole in the corner, near the skirting.

"What's that?" asked Leslie.

"Maurice did that with his tool box. It goes through into his room. We used to have a piece of string through it for signalling with."

"For signalling what?"

"Oh, anything. One for A and two for B, you know." He gave a chuckle. "Maurice used to call it the telephone."

"The telephone." She laughed too. "But that was nothing for Maurice. Don't you remember his Marconi station in our summer-house?"

Did he not? And he remembered a great deal more than this. So also, perhaps, did Leslie, for she suddenly looked at her wrist-watch, and said:

"I say, it's terribly late. I'd no idea. Will you come down and let me out?"

They both hurried downstairs, as if to get away from dangerous ground.

As Bill shot the bolts to again, all the ghosts which had been lurking behind doors and round corners seemed to make a rush for him, and he realised afterwards that he had ducked his head and fairly dashed for the window

over the porch. He pulled the sash down behind him, and, lowering himself over the edge, slithered down one of the pillars to the ground. Leslie was standing, swinging her racquet in her hand, on the edge of the lawn.

"Did it make you feel very old?" she asked, as Bill joined her.

"Old, and dirty," he said, showing her his hands.

"Come, along, then, and you shall see your room."

They crossed the fields again in silence, but as they came through the little gate which led into the garden of Hare Hall, Leslie suddenly said :

"This Mr. Harvey that Papa's got hold of ; have you known him a long time ?"

"No," said Bill. "I'm afraid I hardly know him at all, really. I hope he's settling down all right ?"

"Oh, Papa thinks a lot of him. But he's odd, don't you think ?"

"In what way ?" asked Bill.

But he never got any answer. For at this moment a black spaniel came dashing towards them, and Leslie gave herself up to welcoming it in the curious dialect which she had always reserved for her dealings with animals. That is to say, it would probably sound curious to any human being who heard it for the first time, but there is no doubt that it always went down remarkably well with those for whom it was intended. The spaniel danced up to them and danced away again, and then ran round them, and then ran behind a tree, and then began all over again ; its idea being, apparently, to keep on pretending that it was meeting them for the first time.

In this manner they arrived again at the front door, and as they did so, the big limousine once more came swinging round the corner of the shrubbery, and as it stopped, Lord Longwood got out. He shook hands with Bill warmly, but he seemed a little preoccupied.

"Is Harvey anywhere about ?" he asked Leslie.

"He went off to help Wog to find her luggage," she answered. "She'd lost it again. But I'll see if he's back."

She went off into the house and Lord Longwood followed her. Bill found himself left alone in the hall, from where he was presently rescued and taken to his room by the butler.

"Dinner is at a quarter past eight, sir," he informed him.

"Thank you," said Bill.

This left him about with three-quarters of an hour before he would be expected to re-appear, and, wandering round the room, he saw that his diary had been unpacked and placed on the writing-table, which stood, as bedroom writing-tables generally do, in the darkest corner. He decided to fill in some of the time by bringing this diary up to date.

The history of Bill Fraser's diary is a common enough story. He had been given the first volume for a Christmas present when he was fourteen, and had made the first entry on the following first of January. His friends and family did not trouble to conceal their opinion that if he carried on with his self-appointed task until the middle of February, it would be as much as, if not more than, was to be expected. But Bill had inherited from his father more than a share of the latter's powers of misplaced obstinacy. He took a terrible oath that, come what might, an entry of some sort should appear in that diary under every date for the whole of the year; and when he had achieved this—for he did achieve it—instead of letting himself depart in peace, what must he go and do, but order another volume of the same series? And thus the story went on.

Every first of January the same superstitious fear of appearing weak-minded made him begin his dreary narrative again, and every thirty-first of December another volume of completely unreadable matter joined the row on his bookshelves. On very rare occasions, when perhaps he had been kept in by a chill and had for the time being exhausted other literature, he would turn to one of these diaries; but he could never manage more than a page or two. A powerful mixture

of boredom and shame made him almost instantly return his autobiography to its place, there to remain, he could only imagine, until such time as his executors should sell the whole lot to the pulping works. And yet the same irresistible force which made him carry on year after year with this useless labour, also intervened to prevent him anticipating such action on their part. Could he possibly, he sometimes wondered, have a secret hope that somebody else would one day find it interesting to learn that on March the seventeenth, nineteen hundred and nineteen, he had had a Turkish bath; or that on October the eighth, nineteen hundred and eleven, he had ordered half a dozen shirts? The answer to this query remained for him, as it must remain for us, a complete and insoluble mystery.

Let us watch him now, as he unscrews the cap of his fountain-pen, and sits down to make the day's entry.

"Morning at office," he writes. *"Caught 4.28 at Charing Cross, and to Hare Hall for week-end. Went over White House again."*

Is it or is it not suspicious that there should be no reference in this bald account, the whole of which has now been quoted, to the Honourable Leslie Grahame? One cannot say. Whatever Bill is thinking now, we are not going to get any help from his diary.

6

The party at dinner contained no additions to the people whom Bill had already met, except an elderly lady, whose name, as usual, he failed to catch, but who conveyed the impression that she was some kind of relation or relation-in-law to Lord Longwood. He was surprised to hear her telling him that she remembered him when he was only so high—a height indicated with a hand about thirty inches from the floor,—and only after he had simulated a reciprocal recollection, did he discover that she had thought he was Maurice.

He found himself placed between Leslie and her friend Wog, with the private secretary on Leslie's other

side ; and his first enquiry, naturally, was as to the fate of Wog's luggage.

" Yes, there it was all the time," said Miss Lorden, " and now I'm back in my own clothes, worse luck. I was longing to wear that frock of Leslie's. What do you think of it ? "

Bill turned to look at it again. His frank opinion was that it had probably cost the dickens of a lot of money, but that such money had been well-spent, if it was the frock that made Leslie look like that. However, he couldn't exactly say this. So he said :

" It looks all right."

" All right ? " echoed Wog. " My dear good man, do you realise that that dress is a Roxane ? "

" A what ? " asked Bill.

" Do you mean to tell me that you've never heard of Roxane ? "

Why should he say that he had, if he hadn't ?

" Never," he answered.

Wog stood it well ; but worse was to follow. Within the next five minutes he had also revealed his ignorance of the fame and existences of both Blackman (apparently the very appropriate name of a noted negro *chef d'orchestre*) and Wrigley (a less suitably entitled lawn-tennis champion). But not for a moment was the courageous Wog cast down. Having, as she thought, discovered the category in which Bill should be placed, she was indefatigable in her attempts to shock him, with the result that he began to find her extremely amusing ; and he even had hopes that his appreciation of her well-meant efforts might mitigate the criticism which he was sensible that he deserved for being, probably, at least seven years older than she was.

On his other side he heard Leslie's laugh more than once, each time, he imagined, at some joke of Harvey's, and each time it was necessary to overcome a sudden impulse to leave Wog in the lurch and force his way into this other conversation. But of course with six people at a small, round table, most of the talk was general ; and here the female relative had it all her own way,

being at all times ready with an entirely irrelevant anecdote to illustrate any subject that might arise. These stories were always received with obvious impatience by Wog, with less obvious impatience by Leslie and Bill, and by Harvey with such an exaggerated air of interest that it seemed every minute that the female relative must rise up and strike him. Apparently, however, she took it all at its face value, and was correspondingly pleased.

As for Lord Longwood, his mind was obviously occupied elsewhere. He faced the company with the blank scowl and the gently-moving lips which are generally associated with the man who is next on the toast-list at a public dinner. On the few occasions when he took any part in the conversation, he would as often as not go back to some subject which the others had left some minutes before, showing clearly that he had heard nothing of what had been said since. Altogether he struck Bill as noticeably changed, not only from the Mr. Grahame whom he had known in the old days, but even from the man whom he had met at lunch three weeks ago. But in so far as he thought about it, he put it down to fatigue at the end of what had very likely been a tiring week.

In due course the women rose and took their departure, and Bill prepared himself for one or other of the stock conversations which customarily accompany port and cigars. No man, of course, knows what it is that women talk about during this period of the evening, though there is a theory current that babies and servants enter largely into the subject-matter; but all possible variations of masculine post-prandialism must long ago have been tabulated. In the absence of barristers, who invariably talk shop, and of the dreadful fellow who asks one if one has heard this, that or the other unrepeatable story, one's money may safely be put on politics, wine, racing, motors, golf or cigars, with perhaps a covering bet on houses. I am not, of course, thinking for the moment of shooting parties, which always stick stolidly to the one subject of the day's sport. At none of these

discussions did Bill consider that he really shone. His politics he derived entirely from his morning newspaper—if the wrong one were delivered, he changed accordingly—and though he might reasonably suspect others of doing the same, they, he felt, managed somehow to quote the day's leading article with an air which must always elude him. The other matters, too, required a kind of impassive boastfulness for their correct treatment which he found equally beyond him. He could never tell people about the parcel of Waterloo brandy which he had picked up in a pawnshop, about the double that he had backed at Newmarket, about the merits of his new carburettor or his old mid-iron, not because he objected to lying, but for the simpler reason that he knew that nobody would believe him. In a world of talkers, there must, however, always be listeners, and some gratitude, surely, is owed to those silent members of the community, who sit twisting their legs round dining-room chairs, and occasionally passing the port from left to right. After all, somebody has got to be the audience.

And so Bill settled himself to listen, and to look interested, and to emerge on rare occasions from the background with a hushed murmur of appreciation or agreement, according to his usual practice at any dinner which he was invited to attend. But for once there was a change from the conventional dialogue to which he had listened so many countless times before. For almost from the moment that the men were left to themselves, the new private secretary took the floor, and entertained his two listeners not with stories of golf or motoring or any of the other traditional subjects, but with a medley of autobiographical reminiscence dealing with his own career during and since the war.

And a fascinating story he made of it. One might be attracted or one might be repelled by the individual who thus revealed himself, and Bill, at any rate, experienced a curious mixture of both these sensations, but there could be no questioning the forcefulness of the personality on the other side of the dining-room

table. Yet the odd thing was, that as far as it was possible to make up any general picture from the disjointed anecdotes of happenings in different parts of the world, the record was quite frankly one of failure. Again and again the new secretary would end a story by saying, with a laugh, "—and after that, I was lucky to get away from the place in my clothes," or, "when I cleaned up my accounts, I found I could just clear the car-fare back to New York." One may imagine that all the time Bill was keeping his ears open for any mention of his old friend Colonel Baxter, but of this period in Harvey's life, not a word was uttered. Yes, he was puzzled; not only by the enigma of the man himself, his position in this household, and his own share in securing it for him, but more than all this by the motive which was now making him go out of his way to reveal himself to Lord Longwood as, at the best, an unprincipled opportunist, and, at anything less than the best, a not particularly successful adventurer. Though here again, if it were the business of an adventurer simply to meet with adventures, without reference to their upshot, ought one after all to deny him his success?

More than once Bill glanced at his host's face to see if he could discover what impression these revelations were making on him, but all he could detect, or thought he could detect, was the same look of thoughtful pre-occupation which he had shown all through dinner. For the hundredth time he wondered to what this association of his old and his new acquaintances was going to lead, and how far he was going to be held responsible for the results.

It was Harvey himself who seemed finally to give the signal for the men to leave the dining-room, and it was pretty late before the move was made. As they came out into the hall, Bill heard him putting a question to his employer.

"What about that memorandum, sir?" he asked.

Lord Longwood appeared to give a regretful look towards the drawing-room door, but the next moment he had turned to Bill.

"I hope you'll excuse me," he said, "but, as a matter of fact, I've got some rather important work to get through, and I'd like to try and finish it off to-night."

"Oh, of course," said Bill, and the two others immediately went off in the direction of the study, leaving him to enter the drawing-room by himself.

Here he found the female relative engaged in knitting, and Leslie and Miss Lorden occupied in some mysterious game at a card table.

"Hullo. Where's Papa?" Leslie called out.

"He's gone off to do some work," said Bill.

Leslie looked as though she were going to speak again, but Wog's rich contralto broke in.

"Work?" she said, with a sound of infinite contempt. "Good Lord!"

"Come and join us," Leslie invited, abandoning whatever it was that she had been going to say.

"What's the game?" asked Bill.

They both began to explain at the same time how the game, which apparently had no name, should be played. Roughly speaking, it would seem to be a kind of cross between Demon Patience and Vingt-et-un, with (at any rate on Wog Lorden's part) more than a dash of Rugby football. Six packs of cards were used, portions of which were constantly being discovered on the floor; and, possibly owing to Bill's chivalrous restraint in that part of the game which depended on physical strength, though largely owing to a strange fluidity in the rules, which must, one would imagine, prevent it ever becoming widely popular in London clubs, he found, when at length operations were suspended, that he owed Miss Lorden seven shillings and Leslie one and sixpence.

"You *have* had rotten luck," said Wog admiringly, as she took her winnings.

A vote on the subject of bed was put and carried, and they all drifted out into the hall. But here, after good-nights had been exchanged all round, the female relative suddenly became possessed with a passionate desire to tell Bill a story about something that she had once said to his mother. Unfortunately for the progress

of this anecdote, however, she found herself unable to recall the name of the people at whose house the incident had taken place ; and although she was only too ready to admit that this name had no kind of connection with the point of the reminiscence, yet nothing would persuade her to go ahead without it.

At this point Wog dashed to the rescue, by suggesting a number of surnames, each and all of which Dickens himself must have rejected as impossible, but each and all of which the female relative persisted in examining on their own merits. At about the fifth name, Bill suddenly caught Leslie's eye, and became simultaneously aware that his choice lay between going up to bed that instant, and offering a public apology to the female relative at breakfast.

"Good-night," he managed to gulp out once again, and then he fled.

And yet hardly had he turned the corner of the stairs, before all desire to laugh had completely gone. Isn't it odd how largely the funniness of things depends on one's sharing it with other people ? He wanted to go back and catch Leslie's eye again. He wanted—— No, it wasn't exactly that. What could it be, then ? For a minute, a minute and a half, two minutes, he stood still in the dim light of the corridor, his melancholy and thoughtful expression growing more melancholy and thoughtful every second.

"I—I must stop this," he muttered finally.

He took a step forward.

"It'll be hell, if I don't," he added.

Another step.

"Hell," he repeated.

And with this last, inexplicable utterance, he disappears into his bedroom.

III

A FEW TELEGRAMS

1

EVERY Sunday morning at twenty minutes to eight, Mr. Simeon Bradbeer, who during the six preceding days has been carrying on a small retail business in tobacco, picture-postcards, peppermint bulls-eyes, pen nibs and rubber heels, arrives at the church at Little Matchings, and proceeds to ring its solitary bell somewhere between eight and nine hundred times, his last tug at the frayed bell-rope always synchronising with the first stroke of the church clock. It may also be added that he repeats this operation at twenty minutes to eleven and at ten minutes past six, while on alternate Sundays he throws in an extra five minutes before the Children's Service, thus providing a weekly test of his own muscles and of everybody else's nerves. For apart from association, there is nothing ecclesiastical about the sound of that bell. Indeed, if it had not sought sanctuary in a consecrated building, it is hard to believe that public opinion would have tolerated for an instant the din which it produces.

But being where it is, public opinion has decided to be proud of the bell, and has even bestowed on it the affectionate nickname of Cracked 'Arry, in double compliment to the thing itself and to the weak-minded Sir Henry Hare who originally presented it to the church (as well as building Hare Hall in 1774, and subsequently breaking his neck, under the mistaken impression that he had developed the gift of flight, in 1798).

Yes, Little Matchings will stand no nonsense from open cut-outs, as motorists have discovered to their cost; and Little Matchings still sings of the day when it secured an injunction against the Sticklebridge Wagon

Works for employing a steam saw, variously described by witnesses as resembling the cry of a lost soul, the yelp of a hyæna, the screech of a high-explosive shell, and (by the Vicar) a cacophonous stridulation. But the bell is sacrosanct. If you don't like it, you can go and live somewhere else. If you remain, you do so at your own risk. But people do remain, and whatever their original opinion of the bell may have been, the day inevitably arrives when they too begin to boast about it; in which they resemble (as one might expect) human beings in general, and their own countrymen in particular.

It was the sound of Cracked 'Arry's first performance, stealing across half a mile of meadows, which recalled Bill Fraser to a consciousness of this earthly existence, and automatically he began, as he had always done in his youth, to count the irregular pulsations which Mr. Bradbeer was sending forth into space.

"Three hundred and three, three hundred and four," he murmured, "three hundred and five, three hundred and six, three hundred and sev——" He broke off.

It suddenly struck him that something had happened to him last night. Something important. What could it have been? (Three hundred and ten, three hundred and eleven.) Oh, yes, of course. He'd had an odd feeling in the passage. (Three hundred and fourteen.) A dashed odd feeling. (Three hundred and fifteen.) And the question was—the great question was—(Three hundred and sixteen.) What *was* the great question? He opened one eye, scowled with it at the ceiling, and suddenly realised that he had lost count of the bell. Never mind; begin again. "One—two—three—four—Roxane." Who was Roxane? Dash it, he'd lost count again. "L—E—S——" No, no. That wouldn't do. "One—two—three . . ."

At fifteen he fell asleep again.

And he was late for breakfast. Not that it mattered, because everybody else was late too, except the private secretary, who, it was announced, had gone up to London to fetch some papers which Lord Longwood had for-

gotten to bring down with him last night. People drifted in at intervals, and helped themselves, and walked about a great deal. Wog killed a wasp, and was suddenly taken feminine when faced with the disposal of the body, so that Bill had to carry it out into the garden for her. The morning was so perfect outside, that he nearly forgot to come back again. Lord Longwood read four newspapers at once all through breakfast. The female relative thought aloud on the subject of whether she should go to church, and if so, where. And Leslie looked so lovely, that somebody, coming in through the open window, gave a loud and uncontrollable gasp, and had to cover it up by pretending to cough.

Might this, do you think, be a good point at which to attempt a description of Leslie's looks? Possibly; but we are not going to try. Taste in noses alone varies as much as does taste in puddings or in anything else, and if we say that Leslie's nose was perfect, that is as near describing either it or her as we should risk going. To say more would lead to instant entanglement with the prejudices and preferences of those people who have never seen her, and it would be too terrible if, after that, anybody thought they didn't like her. So although we know exactly and precisely what she was like, neither oxen nor wain-ropes (that is, supposing they took any interest in the matter) shall induce us to say more than this:—Of all the triumphs which old Andrew Grahame had in his time achieved, nothing could ever equal the supreme success of having a grand-daughter like Leslie.

After this, everybody is at complete liberty to shut their eyes and try if they can see her.

Breakfast on Sunday marks a great turning point in the history of a week-end visit. Time, which up to now has proceeded at its customary pace, or perhaps a little slower, should this be your first visit, now reaches the parting of the ways. If the week-end be a good one, it at this point breaks into a gallop and never pauses

until you are in the train again on Monday morning. But if not, it stands still and jibs, and the remaining twenty-four hours drag out their weary length with a disastrous and unpleasing illusion of eternity. By the time that your release arrives, you have all the sensations of one who has been marooned in uncongenial company on a small desert island, and whose notched stick marks as many years as there have in reality been hours. Let us quickly turn our thoughts away from this second kind of week-end.

For Bill Fraser, at any rate, time flew. So fast, indeed, that looking back on his visit afterwards, he found it almost impossible to sort out the various incidents of the day. Lunch seemed to have become confused with breakfast, and lawn-tennis superimposed on church. At one period there had been an influx of visitors, and the hard courts had seen some equally hard usage. That would have been in the afternoon. Yes, but was it at lunch or tea that, with his mind anywhere else, he had made himself so unnaturally agreeable to an aged visitor, that Wog Lorden had found it necessary to give an imitation of him at dinner? Impossible to say. The day had gone so fast, the mixture of past and present had been so bewildering, the general result in his mind so kaleidoscopic.

Dinner did to a certain extent detach itself from the rest of the day. With the departure of the visitors, in a series of motors, it had become possible momentarily to collect one's thoughts, and he had a distinct vision of the small round table in the big, panelled dining-room, with the original party of six assembled again round it. Harvey must, therefore, have returned some time during the afternoon. Yes, for had he not again taken complete charge of the conversation from the moment that the men were left to themselves?

But this time, instead of entertaining the party with stories of his past, he favoured them with his views on economic subjects, and more particularly in connection with the general industrial reorganisation which he declared to be necessary to the salvation of British trade.

If Bill's mind had not been in such a confused and exhausted state, he might have learnt much from this disquisition. But however inattentive he might be, he did certainly remember thinking it odd that Lord Longwood, whose first-hand knowledge of much that was under discussion must have been very considerable, should allow himself to be lectured in this way by his own private secretary. Nevertheless, this was exactly what he did allow. Leaning back in his chair, with his fingers occasionally twisting the stem of his wine-glass, he blinked thoughtfully at the flood of theory which was being poured out from the other side of the table. Now and then he nodded his head in silent agreement, but for the most part he was content to gaze at his secretary in absorbed fascination, smiling a little, perhaps, from time to time, as Harvey remembered to throw in, "but of course you know much more about this than I do, sir," or some other little sop of tribute to his employer's importance.

A curious picture they must have made, sitting there round the candle-lit table. Lord Longwood with his look of half-cautious bemusement, Bill frowning silently at the glitter of the polished mahogany, and Austin Harvey, with his theatrical good-looks and his just-too-pleasant voice, working his preliminary magic with all the grace and assurance which were, when he chose, so pre-eminently his.

At length, after one last, uninterrupted circuit of the port, they rose to leave the room. It is at this moment, of course, at most week-end parties, that one would wish to bid a fond and final farewell to one's host and hostess, and go to bed, slipping unnoticed from their doors on the following morning. The climax of the visit, if there has ever been one, is by now certainly over, and for every minute after this that one stays awake, payment must be made with temper and fatigue at one's work on Monday. But on this occasion temper and fatigue, so far as Bill was concerned, could go and hang themselves. He felt an imperative need to go on looking at Leslie Grahame, and to achieve this purpose he would, if

necessary, sit up all night. But, alas! what good would that have done? As the men re-entered the drawing-room, you might almost have seen the buoyancy escaping from him, as he saw that she wasn't there.

Lord Longwood came unconsciously to his assistance.

"What's happened to Leslie?" he asked.

"She had a headache. She's gone to bed," answered the female relative.

"Oh, bad luck," said Austin Harvey, and Bill echoed these words to himself. For had he not to catch the early train to Cannon Street in the morning? And young women who go to bed with headaches are, if they can afford to do so, as good as certain to stay there for breakfast. The fact is common knowledge. Yet he had so counted on having one more good look at her.

Besides, if he had said good-bye to her in person, it would have been hard indeed if she had not said something about seeing him again. Whereas now——

"Cheer up!" said Miss Lorden's voice suddenly in his ear. "Don't look so Sunday-nightish, or I shall cry."

"I'm sorry," said Bill, making a great effort.

"That's better. That's much better. Now we'll come and play the spelling game."

For Wog, it would seem, any evening which was not spent in some form of intellectual competition was wasted. But the spelling game was a failure in spite of all her efforts, for Harvey was so much too good. By dint of insisting with the utmost violence on the existence of a number of hitherto unknown words, she did, as a matter of fact, manage to come in as a doubtful second; but the rest were absolutely nowhere, and the female relative, who hated being beaten with a passionate hatred, broke up the party by saying that she was going to bed.

"All right," said Wog, "then I shall go too. And if ever I play with you again," she added, turning to the victorious Harvey, "I shall make a rule that you never have any E's."

Harvey laughed.

"Then I shall make you play with a dictionary," he said. "Good-night."

A few minutes later Bill had passed through the historic corridor, and was again in his bedroom.

His suit-case already lay on the hearth-rug, its preliminary layers of clothes reminding him of his approaching departure. This, then, was the end of his first visit as a grown-up guest to Hare Hall. He sat down on the sofa at the foot of the bed, and wondered how, when, where and whether he would see Leslie again.

"But I suppose I can't sit here all night," he remarked presently, and he began his preparations for bed.

"I wonder if twenty-nine strikes a person as old," he muttered a little later.

And then: "I wonder if they've packed my tennis shoes. I believe I left them in the bathroom."

And last of all, after he had put out the light, this savage and mysterious anathema comes from the darkness:

"Oh, *damn* money!"

2

There had been a rattle of curtain rings, and now somebody was speaking to him.

"Eh? What's that?" he asked, emerging from his pillow.

"I was to tell you, sir," said the footman, "that if you aren't in a particular hurry, the car was going up to London about ten o'clock, and would you wish to go in it?"

Bill rubbed his eyes, sorted out the footman's *oratio recta* from his *oratio obliqua*, and said he would be delighted. Neither partner in Fraser and Company ever expected the other one to be unreasonably early after a Saturday to Monday in the country. By the sacrifice of the return half of a third-class ticket, he would avoid the crowded train and gain a welcome addition to his supply of fresh air. And perhaps more than this also.

But there was no sign of Leslie at breakfast, where he found himself alone with a rather taciturn Wog, who barricaded herself behind a newspaper quite as if they had been married to each other for years. When Bill asked how his hostess was this morning, she came out for a moment, gave him an odd look, and snapped: "Right as rain." After which she immediately withdrew within the fortifications, signifying plainly that the parley was at an end.

Towards ten o'clock he wandered into the hall, where he found the butler and his suit-case waiting for him. This seemed a good opportunity for offering his humble tip, which was very graciously accepted and conjured away.

"Does his lordship generally drive up to London?" Bill asked, more for the purpose of showing that he wasn't afraid, than with the wish to satisfy any real curiosity.

"His lordship isn't going up till to-morrow, sir," said the butler.

Here the brief conversation flickered out, and Bill was left wondering if his companion were to be the private secretary, or only somebody's luggage.

There was an opulent sound from without of pneumatic tyres crunching on gravel, and an open touring-car slid into position before the front door. At the wheel was a uniformed chauffeur, and alone at the back was the black spaniel, sitting up on the seat and sniffing the morning air. Bill hesitated for a moment, wondering perhaps whether he were meant to travel with the chauffeur or the dog, and then, as he moved forward, a voice addressed him from behind.

"Good-morning!" Leslie called out. "Papa says will you please excuse him, but he's terribly busy on something or other that's come by the post. I say, will it frighten you if I drive?"

Bill's heart seemed suddenly to change its location.

"No, of course not," he said. "How's your headache?"

"Gone."

He could believe her, for she looked radiant.

And so the chauffeur transferred himself to the tonneau, and Leslie and Bill took their places on the front seat.

"Is everything on board?" she asked.

"Yes, miss," said the butler and the chauffeur in unison.

She pressed the foot-accelerator for an instant and let the engine race, and then, satisfied apparently with the sound, she let in the clutch and they were off. Once again Bill found himself speeding through the familiar lanes, but all too soon they had turned the dangerous corner on to the main road, and the car settled down to its morning's work. Looking round he could see Alfonso, the spaniel, leaning his chin on the edge of the door, half-closing his eyes in the gratification of one of the supreme pleasures in life; and Bradley, the chauffeur, whose look of stolid detachment seemed at the same time to contradict and explain the Mons medal-ribbon which decorated his jacket. And then he turned again to look at the other occupant of the front seat.

"What's the matter?" asked Leslie, without taking her eyes from the road. "Is there something on my face?"

"Oh, no. Not in the least," said Bill, jerking his head away.

"You're quite sure?"

Of course he had to look again.

"Quite," he said. Was she smiling, or was it only his imagination?

"Tell me," said Leslie presently; "what do you make of Wog?"

"I like her." This seemed a fair statement of the truth, but Leslie was not satisfied.

"No, but what do you really think?" she asked again.

"I do really like her. Honestly I do."

"She doesn't get on your nerves?"

"No, of course not. I like her enormously." He almost overdid it this time.

"She likes you, too," said Leslie.

Bill could not resist a feeling of pleasure. This is a comforting thing to be told, no matter where the remark originated.

"Does she?" he asked.

But Leslie was not, it seemed, going to let him have it twice.

"There's a great deal more in Wog than most people think," she went on.

"I'm sure there is," said Bill, though he wondered, as soon as he had said it, whether the answer might not have been better put.

"And she doesn't take to people very easily," Leslie added.

"Oh," said Bill.

Let Wog be granted her merits, by all means. He had no doubt at all that beneath her affectation of super-modernity there could be discovered, by anyone with the patience to look for it, some kind of very genuine person. But at the same time he had a sort of feeling that things were drifting in the wrong direction, if they were going to spend the whole of the drive in praising absent young women. Leslie, however stuck to her subject.

"She's had an awful lot of trouble," she said. "She was brought up to expect that she'd always have lots of money, and then it all went, and she found she'd hardly got any."

"How rotten," Bill murmured, perhaps with more sympathy than he could force into his voice.

"And she was engaged to a man, too, who was killed in a flying accident about two years ago. She was so terribly brave about it that a lot of people said she couldn't have cared. Brutes!"

The speedometer leapt forward in sympathy with the violence of this exclamation, and Bill clutched the side of the car.

"I'm sorry," said Leslie, with a kind of laugh, and again they drove on in silence for some time.

"Is your office still in the same place?" she asked presently.

"Yes," said Bill.

"How does the business get on?"

Why not tell the truth?

"Not very wonderfully well," he answered.

"Is it going to get better?"

"I don't know. I hope so."

"But you must *make* it," said Leslie, with tremendous emphasis. "Any business will go well, if you make it. You've got to try harder. You've got to risk things." For a moment it was old Andrew Grahame's voice that spoke.

"It's all very well to talk about taking risks," protested Bill; "but it isn't all my own money, you know. I've got a partner to consider."

"Who? Mr. Lucas?"

"Yes. I'd forgotten you used to know him."

"I shouldn't have thought that he would have minded taking risks," said Leslie.

It was on the very tip of Bill's tongue to retort that old George would mind as much as anyone, when he suddenly stopped. Would such a statement after all, be true? Was George, who had wrecked his whole life for the sake of a momentary impulse, George, who had earned the Order of St. George (Third Class) by the extreme limit of unnecessary rashness, to be denied the ability to take risks? The thoughts suggested by these questions seemed to expand rapidly in every direction.

Had he accepted too easily the old family tradition that George's ideas must always be suspected, that his expectations must always be discounted? Had it been caution, or the mental sloth and avoidance of responsibility which the army had taught him, that had made him resist and overcome the series of hazardous proposals which his partner had from time to time put forward?

And yet, if George had really believed in these suggestions, why had he always let himself be overpersuaded? Perhaps he could answer this. Ex-black-sheep may easily have an exaggerated distrust of their own judgment. There would be nothing so very unlikely in

that. Or perhaps again George laboured under an undue sense of responsibility towards the son of Robert Fraser. Would not this, also, be George all over ?

"You've given me something to think about," said Bill.

Leslie darted a quick, suspicious glance at him, looking apparently to see if he were making fun of her.

"I'm quite serious," she said.

"So am I," answered Bill.

And, in proof of this, they both laughed.

"But one can't always——" he was beginning again, when Leslie interrupted him.

"Hush ! Tram-lines," she said.

"I beg your pardon."

"Never talk on tram lines," said Leslie. "Once ran into a lamp-post through talking on tram-lines."

In spite of her anxious voice, there was nothing in her manipulation of the car to give any particular cause for alarm, and Bill sank back again into a lengthy reverie, in which George Lucas continued to occupy an important rôle. From these thoughts he was suddenly roused by the appearance, spanning the roadway in front of him, of the hideous masonry of the Tower Bridge. Leslie must have heard the little exclamation that he gave, and (since there are, of course, no trams over this bridge) she asked him :

"What's the matter ?"

"I say ! You've come miles out of the way. Why didn't you tell me ? I could easily have got up to the office from anywhere in London. Weren't you going to Brook Street ?"

"I'm not in any hurry. Besides, it's good practice. Don't you worry ; Bradley will see that I'm all right."

"No, but really—you ought to have told me—I——"

Leslie drowned his remonstrances with a long blast on the electric horn.

"There, there," she said, as the sound ceased. "That will do. Now show me which way to turn."

In a very few minutes they had drawn up at the entrance to Pardon Court. The chauffeur leapt out

and stood waiting, holding the suit-case in his hand. Leslie switched off the engine and sat forward, resting her arms on the steering-wheel.

"Well, good-bye. Thanks most awfully," said Bill.

Leslie was gazing in apparent absorption at the cap of the radiator.

"Do you ever dance?" he thought he heard her ask.

"Did you say 'dance'?"

"Yes."

"You mean, do I go to dances?"

"Yes."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I—— Well, no, I don't know how it is, but somehow or other . . ."

"You mean you don't?"

"Oh, I expect I'd soon pick it up again. I——"

She turned her head towards him at last.

"It doesn't matter," she said, smiling. "I'd thought perhaps you might have taken me to the Stewarts' next week, but I'll let you off." She held out her gloved hand. "Ring up and come and see me some time at Brook Street. It was nice to meet you again. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Bill. "I will—of course—I mean—I wish—I . . ."

Somehow or other he was on the pavement. He heard the high, whirring note of the self-starter, and the next moment he was already looking at the contemptuous back of the car as it moved away. He was overwhelmed by a sense of having, in some way, failed to make use of a rare and un hoped-for opportunity. He ought to have asked more questions. He ought to have been more amusing. Above all, he ought to have said, immediately the subject was mentioned, that dancing was his one aim and pleasure in life. Then she would have asked him to take her to the what's-his-names', and he would have spent the entire interval between now and then in having dancing lessons. And then—yes, but what then? What good would that have done, except possibly provide him with another opportunity to misuse?

This helpless feeling was so different from anything he had ever known. Most infernally inconvenient too. Surely other men—— but the thought of other men made him shudder, and the next instant he was tottering wildly in an effort to avoid falling over his suit-case.

"Oh, come along into the office," he said roughly. "You're doing no good to anyone by holding up the traffic out here."

3

One cannot say with quite what impracticable ideas for the reform of Messrs. Fraser and Company Bill may not have passed through the door of his office on this Monday morning, but whatever they may have been, George Lucas's greeting quickly drove them out of his head. He was sitting in Bill's room and at Bill's desk, roaring down the telephone, but as soon as he saw him come in, he slammed down the receiver, and broke out :

"Where the dickens have you been ? "

"Where've I been ? " repeated Bill, astonished at the violence of this enquiry. "In the country, of course. They drove me up. Why, what on earth's the matter ? "

"Oh, yes," said George. "Sorry. I'd quite forgotten." He paused for a second, and Bill went through a moment's panic that he was going to ask him whether he were yet engaged to the daughter of the house ; but instead of this, he flung a telegram on to the table.

"This came in on Saturday afternoon," he said. "Now what the devil are we going to do about it ? "

Bill picked up the flimsy piece of paper, and read something which looked rather like this :—

"gropelino lemaitre agrapunta modalisco comportos segrebart tragumist nagloramo—Barrett."

"Well ? " asked George, watching his face.

"My dear old fellow," said Bill, "I don't know the code-books by heart. What's it all about ? "

"I've decoded it on the back," answered George

shortly; and he began drumming with his fingers on the edge of the desk. Bill turned the paper over, and, among an interlacing pattern of unsuccessful attempts, read:

"I have information that Lemaître is planning to dispose of agency. Firm offer of 1,000,000 francs would probably secure. Immediate action necessary and personal negotiations advisable. Barrett."

"Well?" repeated George.

"Is this from our Barrett?" asked Bill.

"I don't know of any other."

"Well," said Bill, putting the telegram back on the desk, "it's very good of him to tell us, I'm sure. But we haven't got a million francs, so that ends it."

George Lucas suddenly stopped his tattoo.

"We might raise it," he said.

"And then again we might not," added Bill.

"Of course," continued George, disregarding this last remark, "it would be a bit of a risk."

Grudgingly as he made this admission, he couldn't have chosen a word which would at the moment have attracted his partner more. A risk, was it? Bill suddenly seated himself on the corner of the desk.

"If this fellow knows what he's talking about," he said, laying his hand on the telegram, "and we want to go any further, it seems to me that one of us ought to go to Paris to-night."

George half-rose from his chair.

"You mean that?" he asked, his eyes flashing. And his excitement swung Bill round again towards caution.

"I mean that, on the face of it, it might be worth looking into," he answered. "That's all."

George sank back again into his seat.

"A million francs may be a lot of money for us to find," he said, "but if one could get Lemaître's business for that, it would be cheap."

"It might be," Bill admitted. "Without going into it all, one couldn't possibly say."

"Anything would be cheap that gave us a chance again. A chance of getting out of this infernal rut."

"But, look here," said Bill. "Even supposing we had the money, I don't see how we could run a business in Paris, unless we pretty well chucked things up over here."

"Oh, I'd find some one to run it for us all right," George brushed this objection aside. "Of course you and I would have to spend a good bit of our time there off and on. But there are worse places than Paris. Eh?"

Bill got off the desk, and began pacing the room.

"How would you propose to raise the money?" he asked presently.

"The usual way," said George. "Sell and borrow."

"It's all very well——" Bill began, and broke off to resume his perambulation. When George said "Sell and borrow" with that air of light-hearted enthusiasm, it was enough to alarm anybody, but—but what was the alternative? If Providence had caused this telegram to appear while Leslie's words were still ringing in his ears and the thoughts which they had aroused were still circulating in his skull, didn't it look as if Providence had some idea at the back of it all? Unless he intended that Fraser and Company should remain for the rest of his life the kind of charitable institution into which it had gradually turned—supporting its inmates, but holding out no hope to them of any improvement in their lot—something drastic had sooner or later to be done. Well, why not now?

"This is how I look at it," George was saying. "What would we think, if we heard that some one else had had this chance, and turned it down?"

Bill was conscious of a weakness somewhere in this argument. Other people's bankruptcy, for instance, was a very different thing from one's own. Nevertheless, it had its effect.

"Look here," he said finally. "Give me twenty minutes to think this over. Will you?"

"Why, of course," said George. "You know I don't

want to hustle you into anything. Only, if we decide to go on with it, we ought to do something pretty quick."

"That's all right. Twenty minutes is all I want. By the way, was there anything else in the mail this morning?"

"Does the Post Office ever let us have anything on Monday morning?" asked George, bitterly.

"I'm sorry. I'd forgotten."

George looked puzzled at this unwonted exhibition of absent-mindedness, but he said no more, and, extricating himself from the revolving chair, he made his way out of the room.

"Now, then," said Bill to himself, and, taking the vacated seat, he dug his knuckles into his forehead and prepared to think.

In the first place, if one were going to do anything about it at all, one must assume that Barrett had known what he was up to when he sent that telegram. And the chances were that he had. Bill gave a reminiscent smile. Yes, one could probably place considerable reliance on Sidney MacGregor Barrett, former clerk and sometime office-boy to Messrs. Fraser and Company.

A cockney of cockneys, in spite of his romantic middle name, this youth had already been a fixture in Pardon Court when Bill had made his first appearance there. His most striking characteristic in those days, apart from the conscientiousness with which he attacked his uninteresting duties, had been an encyclopædic knowledge of all records and statistics connected with sport. From the genealogy of the winner of the three-thirty to the averages of the Surrey team; from the reputed transfer fee which had caused a Wolf to become a Spur, to the wrist measurement of Battling Cohen, there was no subject on which Barrett could not provide immediate and accurate information. Such omniscience is, of course, a gift which no more argues the possession of an intellect than does, for example, proficiency at bridge. But the remarkable thing about Barrett had been that he had never let the acquisition of this knowledge interfere in the slightest degree with his work, nor,

so far as Bill and George were aware, had he ever used the office telephone for communicating with his book-maker. In short, he had borne the just reputation of being a good lad.

Then comes the inevitable interruption. Barrett disappears into a cloud of khaki, and for the time being no more is heard of him. Frasers' had guaranteed that his place should be kept for him, and were even contributing, according to their ability, towards his upkeep; but he did not—nor was it expected of him—tell them how he was occupying his time. It was realised that he had other things to see to. Yet in his way he was doing a rather unusual thing; for his memorising powers, deprived of their ordinary raw material by the exigencies of the national crisis, had turned to the acquisition of the French tongue. Not for Sidney Barrett was it sufficient to communicate with his allies by the two words "Napoo" and "Estaminet." By the time that the army had finished with him, his knowledge of French was nearly as good as his knowledge of English, and his accent was a great deal better.

But what use was this accomplishment to a clerk in Fraser and Company? The two partners laid their heads together, and the result was that they obtained for him a three months' trial in the London office of the Agence Lemaître, a French house which acted as selling agent for some of the principal British manufacturers in their own line of business. Here it was hoped that his qualifications would find greater scope, though it was clearly understood that if this hope should be disappointed, Frasers' would still make room for him. But in two months he had been transferred by the Agence Lemaître to their head establishment in Paris, and there he had remained ever since. On his occasional visits to this country he had generally called at Pardon Court, and had never been backward in attributing, with truly Gallic courtesy, his rapid rise in his new employment to the start which Messrs. Lucas and Fraser had been able to give him.

And now, it would seem, his sense of obligation had

actually inspired him to give them advance information of what he well knew must be extremely interesting to them. If it were true that old Lemaître was thinking of disposing of his business, if it were possible for Frasers' to buy it, and to retain the goodwill and the connections which he had built up, here at last would be an opening in the impenetrable circle of closed markets which had hitherto surrounded them. To Bill, sitting scowling at his desk, these certainly appeared to be pretty big Ifs, but surely the preliminary step towards overcoming them was obvious. Either George or himself, or both of them, must go to Paris at once, see Barrett and look over the ground with him. To do more might be impossible, but would they ever deserve any improvement in their affairs, if they did less? Clearly not. And yet, even as he realised that he had come to this decision, he found himself wondering if he would have looked at things in the same way, if that telegram had arrived in time to be opened on Saturday.

Anyhow, his immediate determination had been reached, and it was in considerably less than twenty minutes that he made his way through into his partner's room. George was poring over his blotting-pad, on which he had been making a quantity of untidy-looking calculations, interspersed with classical profiles.

"Hullo," he said, looking up. "What is it?"

In his new mood, it opened Bill's eyes to see that he was apparently considered incapable of making up his mind in less than the time for which he had asked.

"If you agree," he said, "I think the next move is a visit to Paris."

A broad grin broke over George's face.

"Good man!" he said. "Do you mean it?"

Bill nodded.

"Yes," he answered.

He felt a wave of sudden affection for poor old George. He looked so pleased, and he had so obviously been preparing himself to take it well and to say that he agreed, if the alternative view had been put to him.

For some reason Bill again found himself jerking his thoughts back from his morning drive.

He sat down in the visitor's armchair, and the two of them fell to discussing the possibilities of the affair as thoroughly as their ignorance of so much that was important allowed. Taking it for granted that Barrett's information was correct, what was the utmost that they could afford to pay, and how and where were they to try and raise the money? As they settled down to details, the list of questions which must be gone into and the accumulation of figures on all available scraps of paper grew and grew. At about half-past one they sent out for some lunch, and presently the crumbs from sandwiches and the rings from the bottom of wet glasses were added to the rest of the mess which was strewn on the table. They had arrived in the middle of the most indescribably complicated argument connected with the problematical trend of the French exchange, when George suddenly interrupted himself to exclaim :

"Good Lord ! I'd quite forgotten. We ought to have telegraphed to Barrett. Where on earth are those blanks ?"

A violent imitation of haymaking disclosed the yellow sheaf of foreign telegraph forms, and then another question arose.

"I say," asked George ; " which of us ought to go ? "

"Why not both ?"

"We can't possibly. Some one's got to be here to see old Stromberg on Wednesday. You'd better go alone."

"No, we'd much better send you. My French is beyond words."

"You won't have to talk French to Barrett."

"All right. No—I'm sorry. My passport's run out. It'll have to be you."

"Passport ?" George gasped. "That's done it. What's the time ? Don't I need a visa ?"

"Not now," said Bill. "Don't you remember their taking it off ?"

"Oh, yes. So they did."

"We might as well send out for your ticket, though," Bill suggested.

And so a telegram was drafted to Barrett chez Lemaître, saying that Mr. George Lucas would be in Paris on Tuesday morning, and would be glad if the said Barrett would send a message to the Continental saying when and where he would be available for a meeting. With this telegram and a cheque, a clerk was sent hurrying out before the banks closed, and returned in due course with a supply of English and French money, and one of Mr. Thomas Cook's well-known cardboard receptacles containing a return ticket to Paris.

The boat train was timed to leave Victoria at eight o'clock (as it is still commonly known on this side of the channel) and, at Bill's suggestion, the partners arranged to have an early dinner together at the station restaurant. In the meantime George was to go off and pack his bag, and make any other preparations, which he considered necessary, while Bill stayed behind at the office, to clear things up, and to go through a series of severe attacks of nerves over the decision which had been reached.

"I must make old George understand," he told himself on each occasion, "that he's only going there to spy out the land, and that he's not to settle anything without letting me know. If I can only get that fixed in his head, we can't go so very wrong at this stage."

But was this the spirit in which big business deals were pulled off? Was this the kind of policy to gain Leslie's admiration? He shook his head impatiently. They weren't going in for this to please Leslie. Or—or were they?

The rest of the afternoon went quickly enough, and at a quarter to seven Bill found his partner waiting for him at the entrance to the Pillar Hall, as some poetic catering-contractor has called the refreshment-room at Victoria.

"The man says there's a better place upstairs," said George by way of greeting. "Shall we try it?"

Bill nodded. This was clearly an occasion for the better place, and they stepped into the lift.

"You order and I pay," said Bill, as they took their seats. "Only don't forget you're crossing the Channel."

"The generous host encourages his guest," George commented. "Can you run to a pint of beer?"

"I can run to a couple of cocktails to begin with, anyhow," said Bill, and he tried to attract the attention of a boy who was pushing a kind of perambulator full of bottles in and out among the tables.

"My dear old Bill," said George, "since when have you taken to cocktails? Is this what they taught you at Hare Hall?"

"I haven't taken to them. I'm trying to give you a good send-off."

"So you are. But I think I'll stick to the beer, thanks all the same." And the cocktail experiment was abandoned.

No mother seeing off her only child to school can ever have offered half the advice which Bill thrust on the unfortunate George during the meal which ensued, but George's good humour was proof against everything.

"I've always had a feeling that we should make something of this show in the end," he said, "and I believe this is going to be the beginning."

For the moment Bill felt this confidence carrying him away.

"That's the way to go for things," he answered cheerily, and off they went again into a labyrinth of calculations.

Presently the clock at the end of the room warned them that it was time to move, but the discussion was continued right down to the barrier on the platform, past which, in spite of George's most genial powers of persuasion, Bill's progress was barred.

A sudden impulse made them shake hands, probably for the first time in their lives.

"Well, jolly good luck," said Bill. "And you'll let me know how things go?"

"I'll telegraph as soon as there's any news to send."

"And don't worry about hurrying back, if you think you'll do better to wait out there. I'll look after things for you here all right."

"I'm sure you will. But I'm bound to be back in two or three days at the latest."

"Now, then, sir," interposed the guardian of the barrier, "you'd better hurry up." With a last grin and wave of his hand, George fled up the platform. Only just in time, for the next instant the train had begun to move. Bill watched it out of sight, and then turned to leave the station.

Reaction after these seeing-off scenes is unavoidable, but in Bill's case it seemed to be accentuated by the fact that at eight o'clock he had already dined. Perhaps the Corinthian would be the best solution for the rest of the evening. Protected by a newspaper or a monthly review in a corner of the library, he could resume some of the hard thinking which his recent business and emotional experiences still seemed to demand. It would be pleasant, perhaps, to walk up there across the Green Park.

The library was empty when he entered it, for the members had not yet begun to trickle in from the dining-room, and he had been alone with his thoughts in the leather armchair for some time, before the sound of the door opening made him hastily snatch up his paper. Only just in time. It was the dreaded Baxter. Bill buried himself in the newspaper; but the next moment his simulated absorption in the evening's news had suddenly become intensely genuine. For his eye had been caught by a photograph on one of the inner pages, whose resemblance to the original had for once survived the effects of the half-tone process. Lord Longwood, unmistakably. Even as the thought entered his mind, "Curious that I've never seen anything about him in a newspaper before," his eyes had passed to the adjacent paragraph, and were beginning to read.

"Lord Longwood, the well-known magnate, whose name is being freely mentioned in connection with the formation of the new Taxation Committee, has always been fond of a good story. Here is one that he relates"

There followed a supreme example of the newspaper comic anecdote, of which it were better to say no more than that in due course it concluded, ". . . 'Sure, yer honour,' said the jarvey, 'thin it's meself would be alone wid yez!'"

Bill felt his brain straining to catch some elusive thought suggested by this appalling story. What could it be? He would have it in a minute, if only Ah! He had incautiously lowered his protective screen for a second, and in that instant the sight of a red neck bending over the magazine rack, had given him what he was seeking.

Yes, there could be no doubt of it. It had been precisely this story, attached to precisely such another newspaper paragraph, which had, as long ago as the autumn of 1917, been the first sign to reach him in his distant camp of the fame which was approaching, with rapid and irresistible strides, the Great Baxter.

4

Once upon a time, in the days of the air-raids, a lady left her aged mother in the country, to come up to London for a couple of nights. And the aged mother having expressed considerable alarm as to her child's safety during this visit, the daughter undertook to telegraph to her an immediate report of her own escape or otherwise, should she have the ill-fortune to be caught by one of these aerial attacks. Very well, then. As luck would have it, the very first night of this lady's visit, the whistles blew, the maroons banged, the populace scuttled, the air became full of shrieks, buzzings, rattles, booms, clatters and bumps, and then, after a decent interval, there was a sound of bugles, and the lady realised that she was still alive. Accordingly, at a quarter past eight the next morning, she went round

to the nearest post-office and despatched the following telegram :—" Zepps nowhere near me—Gwladys." (As a matter of fact they weren't Zeppelins at all ; they were Gothas ; but this doesn't affect the point of the story.)

To resume. The next night there was no raid, and on the following day the lady returned to her country house. What was her distress, on ringing the front door bell and on the door being opened, to observe her faithful old parlourmaid emit a wild shriek and fall senseless to the ground ? And what was her further distress to find the doctor's hat on the hall table and the doctor himself administering brandy and oxygen to her aged mother, who, in spite of these attentions, was in a complete and alarming state of collapse ? And what was her annoyance to see on the table by her mother's bedside an open telegram, which read :—" Zepps now here. Near me—Gwladys " !

Let us by all means have a happy ending. The aged mother and the faithful parlourmaid both recovered, and Gwladys married the doctor ; but the point which this interesting story is intended to illustrate is—well, I'm not quite sure what it is now, for the more I look at it, the more morals do I see bristling from every line. One might, indeed, preach a whole sermon on this story.

But one thing that it certainly illustrates is the folly of false economy when applied to the drafting of telegrams. In this case a portion of the responsibility for the inconvenience which arose must undoubtedly rest on the Post Office. But another twopence, or threepence at most, spent on the amplification of the message, must have made the flaw in its transmission obvious even to an aged mother.

Yet isn't it curious how widespread such parsimony is ? The mere sight of a blank telegraph form seems enough to afflict many otherwise quite intelligent people with a blind passion for abbreviation, in the pursuit of which they will cheerfully sacrifice any number of words and all hope of being understood, providing only that the resulting agglomeration of rubbish falls within the minimum charge. The loss to the Inland

Revenue I do not mention. The Inland Revenue can, in my experience, look after itself.

With this much of introduction we get on to George Lucas's first telegram, which reached Bill in Pardon Court on Tuesday afternoon.

Here it is :

" Arrived safely appointment this afternoon—George."

Now, of course, as Bill was the first to admit, it was no doubt very jolly to know that George hadn't fallen overboard in the Channel, or been carried away in the Rome express, or been run over in the Place de l'Opéra ; but without laying himself open to an accusation of heartlessness, he could not help feeling that the first part of the message might reasonably have been assumed from the fact that it was shown as having been handed in in Paris. While as for the remainder, he was left completely in the dark as to whether the appointment referred to was with Barrett or with Lemaître. If with Barrett, the telegram told him absolutely nothing ; if with Lemaître, it told him practically the same. Net result, considerable irritation and a total lack of any addition to his knowledge.

However, George's next telegram would probably explain what he really meant, and very likely there would be a letter from him in the morning. With such reflections Bill endeavoured to calm his mind. After all, if one didn't trust one's ambassadors, one could never hope to get anywhere.

Later in the afternoon he carried out the first part of his share in the general plan of campaign, by paying a visit to his bank manager. So far as it went, the interview was a satisfactory one. That is to say that neither the manager nor his assistant, whose silent presence was one of the most unnerving features of the whole affair, laughed loudly or gave other signs of visible contempt at the idea of Messrs. Fraser and Company coming to them for a loan. Indeed, to Bill's considerable surprise, they displayed evidence of genuine dis-

appointment, when he made it clear that he was only preparing himself for a contingency, and not putting forward a definite proposal. But then, that is bank managers all over. The same man who pulls you up for a five pound overdraft on your private account, would (if you only knew it) engage in the most desperate competition to lend you a thousand times that amount. The exaggerated terms in which this particular manager spoke of the reputation of Fraser and Company would have brought tears to Bill's eyes, if it hadn't been for the exaggerated terms on which he proposed, as he described it, to "oblige" him.

But at the moment neither the sum to be raised nor the exact security which would be required for it, were or could be definitely agreed. Bill's only intention had been to test the state of the market and to create, if possible, an atmosphere of hope and confidence in the manager's mind. And, on the whole, the thing passed off well. For though he could see no further than anyone else into the mysteries of that mind, yet surely it was a good sign that at the end of the interview Mr. Moodie's should accompany him as far as the very threshold of the bank. The doors had been closed for the night, and Bill had to make his exit through a small hole in a revolving steel shutter, but the manager's last words, wafted out through this orifice, had been an expression of his and his directors' desire to do everything possible to encourage export trade.

Bill gave a sigh of relief, and a second sigh indicating anxiety, and hurried back to his own desk, where he wrote a brief note to George, telling him what had been achieved, and sent it out to be posted with a late fee so that it should catch the night mail.

And then, although he was engaged to dine at Maurice's that evening, he waited in his room until past seven, in the hope that further news might arrive from Paris. But none came. On the way to the Underground, however, he was fortunate enough to discover a belated hawker with a stock-in-trade consisting of furry black spiders and furry yellow chickens, and by purchasing

half-a-dozen of the latter—for the spiders were frankly terrifying—he hoped to secure Sylvia's forgiveness for breaking his customary appointment with her.

But it was a disappointing kind of evening, for as well as missing his time with Sylvia, he found that Beatrix had gone to bed with a sudden cold and that Maurice had come back from his chambers in a state of complete exhaustion. Bill realised that his presence could only be explained by the fact that it had been less trouble to let him come than to telephone and put him off; which is, of course, one of the penalties of being a near relation.

What with Maurice's fatigue and his own pre-occupation, they had a pretty silent dinner. Several times Bill found himself on the verge of speaking of the Lemaître business, but each time he hesitated, and in the end he was glad that he had held his tongue. For food and drink having eventually enabled Maurice to overcome the worst part of his lassitude, he suddenly began to entertain his brother with the story of certain litigation on which he was engaged, some of the details of which bore a most unattractive resemblance to the kind of thing that might happen if Fraser and Company should find later on that they had bitten off more than they could chew.

"I can't understand any fellow being such a silly ass as to meddle with that kind of show," said Maurice, "when everyone knows the state of the exchange. Can you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Bill answered hypocritically. "One has to take risks sometimes."

Maurice gave a startled look at hearing this unexpected creed, but he answered:

"Sometimes, certainly. But this fellow was doing it *all* the time."

Bill mumbled some kind of agreement, but on the whole he was conscious that, if anything, Maurice's remarks had strengthened his determination to go through with the affair, if it should be possible to do so. This is almost invariably the effect of advice from relations,

even on far more reasonable natures than Bill Fraser's.

"By the way," said Maurice, interrupting these thoughts, "how did your week-end go off? Have a good time?"

"Yes, thanks. Quite."

"Place much changed?"

"No. Surprisingly little. They've got a hard tennis court."

"Who have?"

"Lord Longwood, I mean."

"Oh, I was talking about the White House. Are the Cattersons still there?"

"No," said Bill. "It's empty."

"Is it?" said Maurice, with fresh signs of returning energy. "Are they trying to sell it?"

"Lord Longwood bought it," Bill explained. "I don't know whether he means to sell or let, but I believe he's rather particular about what sort of people get it. It's so very near, of course."

"Of course it's near. But I don't suppose he would object if we were there, for instance. Do you?"

"Oh, no." The only person to object would be Bill himself, and that, as he quite realised, on the most preposterously indefensible grounds. What good would a country house be to him?

"Well, I shall write to him, then," said Maurice. "Very likely he'll want more than I can give, but it can't do any harm to find out. And it can't do any harm to let him know that I'm after it," he added.

Bill again offered up his impious prayer that Lord Longwood might set an impossible price on the property, but aloud he answered:

"Oh, rather not."

If the house were only his, then Maurice and Beatrix and as many children as they cared to have could stay there as long and as often as they liked. Oh, no, he wasn't selfish in that way. And if they liked, he would leave it to Sylvia when he died. He didn't mind

doing that. That was, unless—unless . . . He supposed he meant unless he got married.

But, hang it all, he *knew* the place didn't mean to Maurice what it meant to him.

"Oh, well," he said to himself; "I don't care. He can have it if he likes. He probably will, what's more. But I shan't stop wanting it."

The evening came to a comparatively early end, for Maurice made no attempt to conceal his desire for bed, and his yawns were becoming contagious. He staggered, however, as far as the front door, where the fresh air revived him sufficiently for him to be entrusted with the yellow chickens.

"I'll see she gets them," he promised. "And I'll convey your apologies."

"You'd better not put them in your pocket," said Bill. "Their legs aren't any too strong. Besides you'll only forget them."

It is at these odd moments on draughty doorsteps that even brothers are apt to become confidential, and at this point Maurice suddenly remarked that Sylvia was expecting a brother.

"A brother?" repeated Bill. He felt he would have preferred another niece.

"Yes," said Maurice firmly.

Bill realised the futility of an argument, so he offered his congratulations and enquired when the brother was due.

"November," said Maurice, looking gloomily at the pavement. "It makes me feel damned old."

"Oh, rot!"

"You don't understand. Two of 'em make one feel much older than one. You'll see, one day."

How dashed patronising married people were. Always going on as if only they knew what life meant.

"I thought Beatrix looked very well the last time I saw her," Bill suggested.

"Oh, yes. She's all right. But I loathe it. Only, of course—oh, well." He shrugged his shoulders. "By

the way," he added, "she doesn't want people told yet. You understand?"

"Oh, rather not. Well, good-night."

"Good-night."

At the corner of the street Bill turned and looked back. His brother was still standing silhouetted in his doorway, and he realised that even successful young barristers aren't always happy. It struck him also, not for the first time, that it was a curious kind of a world.

Now that he was out of the house, the desire to go to bed seemed to have left him, and he decided that he would walk back to the flat. He set off at a steady four miles an hour.

On the way he had to pass through a square of big houses. Before one of them a strip of red carpet lay across the pavement, and a string of motors was drawn up by the square railings. From the first-floor windows there came a burst of light, and the rhythmic sound of music. While below, staring up at the house, a little knot of surly and dingy-looking men stood silently watching.

One cannot say what philosophical vapourings this post-war scene might not have suggested to his ruminative mind, for their approach was driven away by the sudden discovery that he recognised the tune which the band was playing. At least, not the whole tune, but one particular bit of it which recurred at stated and regular intervals. There could be no doubt of it; this was the phrase to which Leslie had asked him to put a name, when he had first found himself alone with her in the garden at Hare Hall. Bill instantly conceived what appeared at the moment an extraordinarily ingenious plan. He would go into a music shop to-morrow morning, and whistle that tune to the young lady at the counter; she would then acquaint him with its name, and he would buy it. Then he would send it to Leslie with the thank-letter which he already owed her, but whose construction had somehow hitherto defied all his efforts, and Leslie would write back to him. He didn't see how she could avoid it.

The more he considered this scheme, the more advantages he saw in it. He was particularly attracted by what struck him as its naturalness. And so important had it suddenly become, that for the first time since he had parted from the continental boat train the night before, he left off wondering what George was doing, and how he was getting on, and what the end of it all was going to be. The only thing that mattered now was to remember that tune.

So he sang it to himself all the way home, and hummed it in the lift (to the liftman's obvious disgust), and then, although he was quite certain that he had got it fixed in his head, yet, so that nothing should be left to chance, he committed it to the back of an envelope by means of a new kind of notation, specially invented for the occasion.

The general appearance of the tune in this form was that of a temperature chart in a prolonged and serious case of intermittent fever. That is to say, that when the tune reached a high note, the pencil line went up, and when the tune went down again, the line did the same. Surely it will be agreed that this was as good a way as any other for a man without musical education to attempt to lay an elusive air by the heels. Preferable, anyhow, to the only other alternative that Bill could conceive, which would have been to go on singing it all night.

But for all his trouble, when the morning came, the dashed thing had gone.

In vain did he stand with the envelope in front of his shaving-glass and cause his voice to swoop up and down in an endless series of varying howls. In vain did he close his eyes, and strive desperately to recapture it by imagining that it was still last night. By neither of these means, nor by any of the remaining devices that he tried, did he succeed in summoning up anything remotely resembling the real or, indeed, any other tune; and by the time that he was due to start for the office, he saw that he would have to give it up. It might come back of its own accord, or he might have the good fortune

to hear it again somewhere else, but short of these accidents, the very basis of his whole, carefully thought-out scheme had crumbled away. The thank-letter, now without the excuse for its delay which the hoped-for enclosure would have provided, must confine itself to ordinary, formal expressions.

So he sat sulkily down at his writing-table and wrote out his standard formula for week-end gratitude, which now for the first time meant more instead of less than it said. And he posted the envelope with such savage violence that he barked his knuckles on the pillar-box ; after which he occupied his journey to the office in thinking of all the things which he might have said, but hadn't.

In a shop window near the entrance to Pardon Court he caught sight of, and took a fresh dislike to, his reflection.

"I wonder if a tonic is what I really want," he muttered. "I feel exactly like all those advertisements in the train."

There was nothing on his desk from George. What on earth could the old idiot be up to? Hadn't he promised over and over again to communicate every detail of what he was doing? In a sudden fit of most unusual temper, Bill snatched at his bundle of telegraph forms and had begun drafting a sarcastic message, overlooking in his annoyance the fact that his partner would inevitably have taken it in its literal sense, when the office-boy came in to announce the arrival of Mr. Stromberg, the firm's correspondent at Helsingfors.

"All right," said Bill. "Send him along in." And he put his telegram on one side.

Now although I am just as anxious as were the directors of Bill's bank to give every encouragement to British export trade, there can be no real advantage in representing Mr. Stromberg as more attractive than he actually was. His excessive plainness was a fault for which it would be unfair to blame him, and we may certainly set down his honesty and efficiency as to his credit; but it would be idle to pretend that either

George Lucas or Bill Fraser had ever looked forward to his periodical visits with anything but dread. Why it was that a man whose letters were always short and to the point, and were written, moreover, in quite reasonably correct English, should become so interminably longwinded and so completely unintelligible when he appeared in the flesh, was a point which they had never succeeded in clearing up. And do not, in your natural haste to find fault with British business methods, blame either of them too hastily for not having learnt Mr. Stromberg's language. This wasn't the trouble. The trouble was that Mr. Stromberg was so entirely and unjustifiably satisfied with his ability to converse in our mother tongue, that, once he had reached these shores, he would never permit a single sentence to be addressed to him through any other medium.

This tiresome idiosyncrasy, taken in conjunction with the fact that during his visits to London he was in the habit of treating the office in Pardon Court as a home from home, had the effect of making these visits a pretty severe test of Messrs. Fraser and Company's tact and patience. Fortunately he scarcely ever stayed for more than two or three days, or there can be no telling what might not have happened. For never yet had he taken his departure without George announcing that in another twelve hours he would have felt it his duty to murder him; a course of action which, quite apart from any other effects, must have hit the remnants of Messrs. Frasers' business very severely.

On this particular Wednesday morning Mr. Stromberg remained closeted with Bill for nearly three hours. The first hour he occupied, as far as it was possible to gather, in describing his journey from Finland; and this was really the easiest part, for Bill only had to look interested and Mr. Stromberg was perfectly satisfied. At the conclusion of this portion of his recital he suddenly asked where Mr. Lucas was, and when informed, entered immediately on a long, confused, but (to judge from his expression) disgustingly knowing harangue on the subject of Paris, which in his view represented, appar-

ently, general debauchery and nothing else. Though reluctant to sacrifice his partner's character, Bill felt that if the alternative were to be an explanation of what he was really doing, then George must look after himself. And in any case, Mr. Stromberg seemed to think none the worse of him for seething himself in vice; indeed, on the whole, this misunderstanding seemed rather to increase his confidence in the firm, and he began recounting a number of stories of what used to happen in Petrograd in the old days, which, if Bill had understood them, would probably have caused his hair to stand on end. Fortunately Mr. Stromberg in this vein reached his high-water-mark of incoherency and gibberish.

About a quarter past twelve, however, he suddenly remarked: "But this was not perhaps for what I am not here, yess?" and opened the leatherette despatch-box which he had been nursing since his arrival. If he were to be understood as meaning by this that it would be a good thing to talk a little business for a change, then Bill felt that he agreed with him, and he braced himself once again.

One of Mr. Stromberg's mannerisms when talking what he believed to be English, was to fill up any of the pauses which marked his search for a missing word with a kind of buzzing sound. By this simple means he was able at the same time to prevent anyone else from breaking in on him, while still retaining his right to resume as soon as he had found the word for which he was looking. As time went on, this buzzing would develop into a kind of sustained drone, which mingled with the other sounds of his voice, with the result that the longer he was allowed to talk, the more difficult he became to understand. This was, of course, a bad outlook for the business part of the present conversation, but by disregarding everything that he said, and concentrating on the documents with which he illustrated his remarks, Bill did succeed in obtaining a general idea of his meaning.

And what he gathered in this way was all to the good.

Trade was apparently reviving, a rival business had got into difficulties which had led to an extension of the area covered by Mr. Stromberg's firm, and the long and short of it was that he was prepared to place a considerably larger order than he had done for several years.

Bill had for some time realised that his next duty would be to invite Mr. Stromberg to come out to lunch, but now he felt that he had fairly earned this hospitality ; so at the next convenient interval he said, very slowly, loudly, and genially :

"What about some lunch, Mr. Stromberg ? I should be very much pleased if you would join me somewhere."

To his surprise, instead of instantly closing with this offer, as he had always done on his previous visits, Mr. Stromberg replied :

"But I am so much more pleased if you shall yoin me."

"Oh, no," said Bill. "It's very good of you, but you'd much better come along somewhere with me."

"But I shall *neffer* do that," answered Mr. Stromberg, politely, but firmly. "Come. It iss all arranged presently at once."

He began ramming his papers into his case, and regardless of Bill's continued protests, he seized him by the arm, led him out into the street and forced him into a taxi.

"We eat at my hotel," he said.

And they did.

The name of this dreadful place had been known to Bill for years, for Mr. Stromberg had never to his knowledge stayed anywhere else ; but this was his first (as he instantly hoped it would be his last) experience of its interior. Gazing round, as they took their seats on opposite sides of the cactus which decorated their table, he wondered, but wondered in vain, why, with all the hundreds of establishments which he had to choose from, Mr. Stromberg should yet continue to return time after time to this unspeakable abode. But he no longer wondered that he should spend so much of his visits to London in the comparative gaiety of Pardon Court.

It really seemed incredible that such places could still

exist outside the pages of the *Uncommercial Traveller*, but perhaps the region surrounding King's Cross Station was particularly insensitive to change. Bill remembered his one visit to Helsingfors, and the large, clean, comfortable hotel in which George and he had stayed ; and then compared it with this frowsy mausoleum, which had the impertinence to affect superiority by calling itself "Private." Was it to tell of this gravy-splashed dining-room and that dingy, gas-lighted corridor outside, that Mr. Stromberg returned to his northern home from the greatest city in the world ?

This whole, sudden revelation of London as it might be seen by friendless foreigners—the humble ambassadors whose composite opinion counts for so much more in the goodwill of nations than that of their official representatives—struck him so forcibly, that for the moment he quite forgot to ask himself what, as a business man, he should of course have been asking ; namely, why Mr. Stromberg was for the first time in his life offering him his hospitality, instead of following his customary practice of taking as many meals as he could possibly manage at Messrs. Fraser and Company's expense. Such a sudden reversal of established procedure would have filled the true business man with suspicion, but as Bill did his best to consume the alternate charred and undercooked courses which were laid before him, nothing was further from his thoughts than that this horrid entertainment was intended by his host to smooth the way for his commercial plans.

The discovery, however, had not to wait for very long. For having pressed on his guest a curious, dark object, which might have been taken for a cigar, if it had not, fortunately, been practically fireproof, Mr. Stromberg proceeded to deliver himself of a series of confused utterances, whose purport Bill gradually gathered was a suggested modification of the means by which Messrs. Fraser were usually paid for their services.

Now quite apart from anything else, this was a matter which it was sufficiently awkward to have to settle in George's absence. But this wasn't all. For Mr.

Stromberg's suggestion, if it were adopted, would clearly mean that Frasers' would be kept out of a pretty large sum of money for several months, and this just at the very moment when they might need every penny that they could lay hands on in its most fluid and negotiable form. Yet through the fog of his extraordinary dialect, Mr. Stromberg's alternative loomed only too clear. If Frasers' didn't care to fall in with his plan, then he would take his business somewhere else, with the result that they could probably whistle before it ever returned.

And to add to Bill's perplexity, Mr. Stromberg had already informed him that he had arranged to leave England on Thursday night, which must mean a definite yes or no by this very afternoon at the latest. It was all very well, he thought, to talk about taking risks, but what were you to do when you were faced with two different risks, and didn't even know which was the greater?

At one moment it seemed that the only thing to do was to accept these altered terms, and telegraph to George to drop his negotiations and come home. Yet where would this land them in the end? Suppose that the next time Mr. Stromberg placed an order they found that it had sunk back to or below the normal level, would they be any nearer a permanent way out of their difficulties?

Yet it wouldn't be much fun, on the other hand, to have to tell old George that he had been amusing himself in his absence by dissolving the firm's most valuable foreign connection. No, it certainly wouldn't.

"I'll tell you what," he said at last, breaking in on Mr. Stromberg's endless buzz. "Let's go back to the office and finish our talk there. I shall have to look into this rather carefully, I'm afraid. It means a big change for us, and I hardly like to say how it would suit us without seeing how the rest of our orders stand."

Yes, that was the only thing to do. Play for time, and hope that before he was driven into a corner, there might be a telegram from George. As for the other orders he knew how they stood only too well,

"By all means we shall do that," said Mr. Stromberg, pleasantly. "I am not to hurry you except but it is necessary."

Taking this as agreement, Bill rose from his chair and dropped his cigar into the cactus.

"Come along, then," he said.

In another taxi they rattled back to the City.

5

And lo and behold, as if in answer to his unspoken prayer, on his desk Bill saw a telegram.

"Excuse me," he said, and without waiting for further permission, he tore it open.

"Lemaître has accepted offer twelve hundred thousand francs. Very sorry, but in circumstances impossible do more. Returning to-morrow by Boulogne. George."

He crumpled the paper with one hand and stuffed it into his pocket.

It was all off, then. Some one else, with the money there to put on the table, had got in first. Faced with this accomplished fact, of course it was impossible for George to do any more. For some reason they had both assumed that if there were any truth in Barrett's message, then it must all be true. Yet why, after all, shouldn't other people, there on the spot, have got just as early information as his? And this, of course, was exactly what must have happened. In other words, Fraser and Company had never had a chance: He might have known it. Hadn't there been a curse on everything they had touched ever since the beginning of that filthy war?

Poor old George. How sick he must be.

Bill pulled out his handkerchief and passed it across his forehead, and as he did so he suddenly realised that Mr. Stromberg was staring at him.

"It is bad telegraphs, yess?" he was asking hopefully.

"No," said Bill with an effort. "Not at all. It's from Lucas, to say he'll be back to-morrow night. We shall have to fix this thing up without him."

"Fix? Yess," said Mr. Stromberg. "And now you shall look to those other orders also."

It was on the tip of Bill's tongue to reply, "What other orders?" but he just remembered in time. Having said as much as he had, he must at least go through the appearance of consulting something or somebody. The credit with the bank would, he knew, be all right, for he had, of course, gone into this yesterday with Mr. Moodie.

"Look here," he said. "Here's the newspaper. Can you make yourself comfortable here for a bit, while I go and look into the thing properly. I shan't be long."

"But surely," answered Mr. Stromberg. And at this moment the telephone bell rang.

Dash it all! Why must everything always happen at once?

"Excuse me," said Bill again, and picked up the receiver.

"Hullo!" he shouted. You know the way that one is apt to shout when the telephone rings at the wrong moment.

"Can I speak to Mr. Fraser, please?" said a voice.

"This is Mr. Fraser speaking. Who is it there?"

"Oh, it's you, is it? I say, have you got my sponge?"

"Have I got your what?"

"My sponge. S for soap, p for pipe, o for overflow——"

"I'm afraid there must be some mistake," Bill interrupted. "This is Mr. Alexander Fraser. If you are quite certain it's me you want, would you please mind telling me your name?"

The icy politeness of these words must, you would have thought, have struck terror into the bravest heart. But Bill detected no sound of fear in the voice which answered him.

"Good Lord!" said this voice. "Have I interrupted you while you were making your fortune? I'm so sorry. I'm Wog Lorden."

"Oh, yes. Miss Lorden; of course."

Out of the tail of his eye, Bill saw Mr. Stromberg prick up his ears. In another minute he would obviously

begin being knowing about him too. Hang it all, Wog might have waited until he had got back to the flat.

"I say," she was continuing, "I'm awfully sorry to trouble you, but I couldn't find my sponge when I got back to London, and I've asked Leslie and she says she can't find it either; so I thought it might have been packed with your things by mistake. It was a very big one. Quite new. You couldn't possibly not recognise it."

"I'm very sorry, Miss Lorden," said Bill, "but I'm quite certain I haven't got it."

"Well, you might sound a bit sorrier," said Wog.

Drat the girl!

"I am very sorry," he repeated, slowly and coldly. "Will that do?"

"I don't know what the matter is with you to-day," Wog answered. "If only you'd been a bit pleasanter, I might have told you something. But now I shan't. Good-bye."

Well, if she hoped to keep him hanging on to the telephone by this silly kind of mystery, she was wrong. He'd had enough.

"Good-bye," he said. "I hope you'll find your sponge."

"I hope you'll find out what I was going to tell you," said Wog, and with a click she was gone.

The second that Bill had put back the receiver, the poison which this extraordinary young woman had dropped in his ear began to work. If only he had known how to get hold of her, he would have rung her up there and then and begged her to explain herself. But he didn't know how to get hold of her, and there was Mr. Stromberg obviously bursting with pleasure at having discovered that both the partners in Frasers' were men without morals, and, after all, there were other things to do. So he pushed the telephone away, and tried to put the whole interruption out of his head.

But one can't forget things to order. The problem remained present as an irritation at the back of his mind all through his long afternoon at the office, and when at

last he had shipped Mr. Stromberg off to his hotel, having reached a verbal agreement which was to be confirmed in writing the next morning, the first thing he did was to turn to the letter L in the telephone directory. But the choice which he found there was too wide. Anxious as he now was to offer his apologies and beg to be given another chance, he could hardly ring up twenty strange houses in order to do so. Besides, if Wog were as impoverished as Leslie had represented her to be, she probably wasn't on the telephone at all.

Yet by this time he had, of course, got it firmly fixed in his head that the message had something to do with Leslie, and he gave himself a very unpleasant evening by imagining all the things that he might have missed by letting his temper get the better of him. He even went the length of seriously considering whether he should not buy a sponge and post it down to Hare Hall with a message of repentance. It was fortunate, perhaps, that by this time the shops were all shut.

The morning found him well on the way towards the recovery of his sanity, but there was still a test in store for him, in case he should have forgotten too easily. For on the back page of his daily paper there was reproduced a photograph of Leslie and her father, engaged in crossing a street in the peculiar manner affected by people in such pictures. Her name was not given, but beneath the photograph he read, "Lord Longwood, whose appointment to the new Taxation Committee is announced, walking in the West End yesterday."

Bill's spoken comment had escaped him before he had time to realise what was coming.

"Harvey!" he muttered.

And then: "But is it Harvey?"

He turned hastily to the news columns, half expecting to find the list of committee-members ending up with the words, "Joint Secretaries, Mr. Blank Dash and Mr. Austin Harvey (unpaid)." But though the name wasn't there, what he read seemed by no means calculated to put his half-formed theory out of court. For the sub-

editor, though anxious apparently to do his duty by his public in providing them with particulars of the members' careers, had, with all the resources of his great organisation behind him, found nothing better to say when he came to Lord Longwood, than that his father had been well known as Sir Andrew Grahame, and that he had large industrial and financial interests.

If this sort of thing represented informed public opinion, then why had the newspaper photographer gone stalking the second Lord Longwood through what he called the West End, twelve good hours before the names of the committee had been issued to the Press? Why were there no pictures of any of the other members?

There seemed only one answer. Harvey.

Then what would the next move be?

How could one tell? Judging by this beginning, it seemed clear that Lord Longwood was going to be run on considerably more dignified lines than had been thought good enough for Colonel Baxter. One would not, for instance, expect to find him contributing articles on mixed bathing to Sunday newspapers; but to what did a position on a big Government committee generally lead? To a peerage; but Lord Longwood had already got that. Was the unfortunate man to be sent into politics, then? Would it be Harvey's idea of "making things hum" to get his employer into the Cabinet?

At this point Bill's thoughts paused, and swung round again in the inevitable reaction. For what evidence of any serious description had he got to support this fantastic idea? Would he, for example, have the courage or impudence to go to Lord Longwood, tell him what he suspected of the Baxter business, and warn him against the private secretary whom he had a month ago been warmly recommending? No, of course he wouldn't. He was letting his imagination play tricks with him. Why shouldn't the Government put a rich peer on a new committee of enquiry, if they wanted to? Hadn't they been doing the same kind of thing for years?

Besides, dash it all, how long had Harvey been in this new job? The idea was absurd.

To suppose that Lord Longwood couldn't look after himself! Of course it was absurd.

But one might as well cut out the photograph and put it in one's blotting-book. That, at any rate, would commit one to nothing.

And that was what this strange Bill of ours proceeded forthwith to do.

6

There followed another wearisome day with Mr. Stromberg.

He set in about eleven o'clock, and remained in constant occupation of the office, telephoning and receiving his visitors, until well after six, when Bill went with him to King's Cross and saw him into the train for Newcastle.

His brain was reeling as he left the station, and the muscles of his throat were stiff with the sympathetic movements with which they had been involuntarily accompanying Mr. Stromberg's onslaughts on the English tongue. But for another year, at the very least, they could only communicate with each other by letter, and the knowledge of this made it easy to forgive him all. Of this, and of the orders which were now safely filed at Pardon Court. After all, there would be something to cheer old George up with when he came back. One mustn't forget that. Perhaps it would be a good idea to go and meet his train. Very likely he would need a bit of cheering up after his fruitless expedition.

The Folkestone boat express was due at Victoria at ten minutes past ten. Bill dined quietly at the flat, smoked a pipe over a book, and then, with plenty of time still in hand, he walked out towards the station. As you probably remember, the authorities responsible for the planning of this particular terminus seem to have overlooked until it was too late the fact that His Majesty's Customs and Excise would require a considerable superficial area in which to carry out their pointless and irritating duties; and the result is that whenever a boat train arrives at Victoria, a prolonged and confused *melée* takes place, in which

travellers, travellers' friends, porters, policemen, and Customs officials become inextricably entangled with the baggage, each other, and several hundred feet of wooden barrier. From the moment that the train is signalled, knots of more or less frantic persons dash wildly about in the hope of discovering some place within sight of the platform where they will be permitted to wait; an intention which the station officials are indefatigable in preventing them from carrying out. Moreover, in order the more thoroughly to impress visitors to these shores with the British genius for organisation, a single, narrow archway provides at once an entrance and an exit for all the vehicles into which the travellers are hoping ultimately to convey themselves and their belongings. To meet a solitary arrival by a boat train is, in short, no joke.

But George Lucas's spectacles, his lanky figure and his slouching walk were distinguishing signs which greatly assisted in differentiating him from a needle in a bottle of hay, and the *melée* had been in progress but a comparatively short time, when Bill suddenly detected these well-known features forcing their way through the thick of it. Needless to say, George had made his appearance on the opposite side of the wooden barrier; but in a concourse which consisted so largely of hysterical aliens, Bill had little hesitation in shouting at him.

"Hi! George!" he yelled, and he brandished his hat in the air.

Of the thirty or forty people who turned to stare at him, George Lucas was fortunately one, and he rapidly signalled a route by which there seemed some hope of their meeting. In three or four minutes a junction had been effected.

"Hullo!" the partners remarked to each other.

"What sort of a crossing?" asked Bill.

"Rather wobbly," said George. "I say, is anything the matter?"

"No, of course not. I only thought I'd come and meet you."

George looked relieved.

"Did you get my telegrams?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bill. "What there was of them."

George grinned in a nervous and mysterious manner.

"I'm awfully sorry——" he began.

"My dear old fellow, that's perfectly all right. I'm sure you did your best. Don't you worry about that."

"That's good of you," said George, with a further look of relief. "I got in a stew afterwards that you'd think I'd gone too far."

"Gone too far? How do you mean that?"

"Over the agreement," said George, beginning to look puzzled.

"But what agreement?" They seemed to be at some kind of cross purposes.

"Here," said George, slapping his breast pocket. "But it was a case of now or never, and I knew you'd have done the same if you'd been there."

"My dear George," said Bill, "I'm very sorry to appear unintelligent, but would you mind telling me what agreement you are talking about, and with whom?"

"Why, our agreement with Lemaître," answered George. "You said you'd got my telegram, didn't you?"

A horrible light seemed suddenly to break over Bill.

"Yes," he stammered. "Certainly; but . . ."

"But what?"

"Do you mean to tell me that it was *your* offer that was accepted?"

"My dear old man, didn't I say so?"

"Didn't you—— Look here," said Bill, and he pulled the crumpled message out of his pocket. "Is there a single word there about its being your offer? Is there, now?"

George placed the telegram at his usual distance of about seven inches from his spectacles, and examined it closely.

"It's perfectly clear," he announced.

"Clear!" shouted Bill. "Clear as bilge-water. What the dickens did you mean by saying you were so

sorry but you couldn't do any more, and you were coming home? Would any man in his sane senses gather anything from that except that some other blighter had got in first and outbid us?"

George was still poring over his remarkable composition.

"I see what you mean," he said slowly. "I say, I'm awfully sorry. Of course; how damned funny!" And he began to laugh. To Bill it seemed the laughter of a maniac.

"That's right," he broke out. "Ha-ha, by all means. And very laughable too. But where do you suppose the money's going to come from?"

"Oh, the money will be all right," said George. "I say, hang it all, I think you might look a bit more pleased. Don't you realise what I've done for you?"

And the worst of it was that, for all his rage and despair this was exactly what Bill did realise. But for that infernal telegram and its effect on his arrangements with Mr. Stromberg, he would probably have been crowning old George with laurels and wild parsley for having put the deal through, even at twelve hundred thousand francs of borrowed money.

"I know," he said wretchedly. "You've done wonders; but—but look here, we can't stand talking here all night. Come back to the flat with me. We've got to have this thing out."

Still exhibiting nothing more than mild surprise, George followed his partner out into the station yard. They found a taxi, and drove quickly to Regency House.

"Have a drink first," said Bill, leading the way into his sitting-room.

"Thank you," answered George politely. "Whisky and soda, I think."

Bill produced the fatal bottle, whose acquisition seemed now to have led by a direct chain of events to this appalling situation, and mixed his partner a glass.

"Now, then," he said. "First of all, what does this agreement say? Have you paid them anything yet, and do we forfeit that if we back out?"

"It's perfectly all right," George was beginning, but Bill broke in again.

"I know it is," he said. "I don't doubt it for an instant. But this is the trouble. I've gone and let us in for financing a big deal with Stromberg while you were away, and I want to know how I stand."

George put down his glass untasted.

"You've done what?" he said. "But that's not our business. What's the amount?"

"Fifteen thousand pounds. And we've got to find the money for six months. I tell you, it was take it or leave it, and——"

"You did this because of my telegram?"

What was the use of hedging? The gods on high must decide which of the partners in Fraser and Company was the more completely incompetent business man, but meanwhile there was nothing to be gained by either of them concealing anything from the other.

Bill nodded.

"Good Lord!" said George, "I'll never send another telegram as long as I live. Listen to this. I gave Lemaître my cheque for four thousand."

"Francs?"

"No, pounds."

"But we haven't——"

"I know. But there was plenty of time to raise it."

"Well, go on. What then?"

"And I've signed an agreement to pay the balance within a month."

"And if we don't?"

"We've just got to. If we don't, he can sue us for it."

"It wasn't an option, you mean?"

"No," said George. "It was like you and Stromberg."

"What do you mean?"

"It was jolly well take it or leave it."

"Oh," said Bill; and they remained staring at each other in solemn, interminable silence.

IV MR. GIRLING

1

DAYLIGHT was beginning to make itself faintly felt outside the window before the two principals in Messrs. Fraser and Company finally separated. Through all the long hours of the night, regardless of everything except the matter under discussion, they had talked and argued, and argued and talked. And at the end of it all neither of them had budged so much as an inch from his own attitude towards the problem at issue, and no decision of any kind had been reached. George Lucas, who was a great believer in *solvitur ambulando*, and must have walked nearly fifteen miles round the sitting-room table during the night, had through thick and thin returned to and reiterated his one, unjustifiable refrain.

"It's all perfectly simple," he would begin again and again, and no matter where the argument led them, at a given point he would always make a fresh start from this same extraordinary postulate.

"It's all perfectly simple," he said. "You can say what you like, but we've got two jolly good investments. I quite admit that some time in the next few weeks we've got to raise something like forty thousand pounds, and"—he raised his hand to stem Bill's attempted interruption—"and I quite admit that at the moment I have no idea how we're going to do it. But, hang it all, we know that Stromberg is all right, and we know that Lemaître is all right. Well, what more do you want?"

Bill, who found that his brain did itself most justice when he was lying on the sofa with his feet propped up

on the end, returned to the attack. In spite of his attitude, there seemed no lack of vigour in his mind.

"I give you Stromberg by all means," he said. "But as for Lemaître, I know nothing except that we've been and bought his business. Incidentally we can't pay him. But leaving that on one side, how on earth can we tell, simply by looking at a lot of figures that he and Barrett have shown you, that he hasn't done us in the eye. Why should he be in such an infernal hurry to sell out? Tell me that."

"That's perfectly simple," said George again. "He's just been told that his wife can't live unless she goes to Algeria for good. I've told you that six times."

"That's what he says," answered Bill heartlessly.

"But hang it all, I've *seen* her," shouted George. "There's no fake there."

Whether there was or wasn't, Bill was sensible that at this stage it was hardly possible to ask for a medical certificate. He contented himself with a dubious grunt.

"And look here," George continued; "it's no good talking about what we might or might not have done. We've got to face the facts."

"I absolutely agree," said Bill. But though he hadn't yet said so, it seemed to him that this was just what he couldn't get George to do. As far as anything was clear in his mind, the only possible course appeared to be to try and get some one else to take over a very large part of their commitments. This would mean a loss, almost certainly, but the alternative looked most unpleasantly like bankruptcy. Yet to all arguments of this description his remarkable partner was completely deaf. Nothing would induce him to consider letting go his hold on any portion of either of the deals.

"This is our one chance," he kept on saying, "of going ahead. We simply can't afford to let anything out of our hands."

"Well, perhaps you'll tell me how we can afford to keep anything in them," Bill retorted at last.

"You don't understand," said George. "As long

as we don't lose control, I don't care how much we borrow."

"But that's just my point. We can't borrow any more without losing control."

"But surely some one could be got to advance it," said George, his tone suggesting that by introducing this fresh word he had also brought in an entirely new idea; and the next moment, before Bill could adjust his objection to this altered form, he suddenly stopped in his tracks, and thumped the table with his hand.

"I've got it," he said. "Lord Longwood! Old family friend; pots of money; knows all about textiles; ought to be only too——"

"No!" shouted Bill, sitting up with a start. "I'm very sorry, George, but I'll see the whole business go to blazes, before I try to borrow a single halfpenny there. Is that clear?"

"Oh, perfectly," said George; and then he grinned. "Perfectly," he repeated.

"Look here, you low-minded old owl," said Bill, struggling to his feet. "What on earth do you mean by making that face?"

"There, there," said George soothingly. "Lie down again. It's all right. I didn't mean anything."

"You'd better not," Bill muttered threateningly.

And at these words, to his horror and surprise, his partner suddenly broke into the most amazing and uncharacteristic apology, apparently for the way in which he had represented their joint interests in Paris. But so rambling and incoherent did he become that it was hard to be certain even of this. At one moment he was heaping mud on his own head, and at the next scooping it off again and distributing it indiscriminately on his relations, his business rivals and the Russian people. Bill did his best to stop him, for he found it a most painfully embarrassing scene, but every time he spoke he was shouted down.

"No, no," said George, waving the interruptions aside with his hand. "You don't understand. You don't know what your father did for me. But I'll see you

through on this, if I have to sell my clothes and everything else. I'll——"

"But there's no question of——"

"You've trusted me," George bellowed. "And this is all I've done. But I tell you it's going to be all right. You'll not have to go on supporting me for ever. You'll——"

"But I'm not supporting——"

"Ass! Fool! Idiot!" yelled George, and then, seeing Bill start, explained: "I mean myself."

"Oh, shut up, George. You're tired out; that's all. We shan't get any further by talking about this to-night. You'd much better go to bed."

"Had I?" he asked, in a helpless kind of way.

"Yes, of course you had. And you'd better have my room. I shall be all right in here. You can't possibly carry that bag all the way home, and we shall never get a taxi now."

"That's true," said George, all quiet again now. "And I shouldn't be able to get into my rooms if I did. But I'll have the sofa, thanks very much all the same."

And argument on this point was useless. Nothing would move him.

"All right, then," said Bill at last. "I'll get you a rug."

"I've got all I want in my bag, thank you. I have really."

But he accepted the rug when it was brought, and the last that Bill saw of him, when he looked in a little later, was a huddled and monstrous mass, breathing peacefully, with his feet in the coal-scuttle; and on the corner of the sitting-room table his still untasted glass of whisky and soda.

Somebody was standing by the bed and speaking.

"Woz matter?" asked Bill sleepily.

"I say, Bill."

Bill opened his eyes, and beheld his partner, dressed, shaved, and apparently in his right mind.

"Hullo," he yawned. "Woz time?"

"Wake up," said George. "I've got to catch a train."

"Train? What train?"

"I've thought it all out," said George. "I suppose you've got Stromberg's order on the file?"

"Yes," Bill answered, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Well, I shall go straight to the office and look through it, and then I shall catch the quarter past ten to Leicester. I'll wire Ledburys' that I'm coming. If we're expected to give Stromberg six months' credit on a big order, surely to goodness they can afford to meet us part of the way. Anyhow, it's worth trying."

"Ledburys' can't fill the order by themselves," said Bill. "They don't make half the stuff. We should have to go to Brackett and Smith as well."

"All right, then. I'll go on to Nottingham and try the same game with them."

Objections were obvious, even to a man who was still only half awake: for credit isn't a question of persuasion, but quite simply one of—well, credit. But Bill felt that his destructive criticism had done enough. There was certainly one chance in a thousand that some arrangement might be reached with the manufacturers which would not squeeze Frasers' out of all future dealing with Finland. At any rate this was better than doing nothing.

"All right," he said. "I'll come with you."

"No," said George. "You've got to stay and see that my cheque isn't dishonoured. And Barrett will be coming over on Sunday with Kessler—that's Lemaître's manager—to talk details, and if I'm not back, you'll have to see them. By the way, I've ordered breakfast. I hope you don't mind."

"Quite right," said Bill. "I'll be with you in two seconds."

Nothing can look quite so bad in the morning as it does at night; perhaps this is why executions are kindly arranged to take place so early; and in spite of everything, as he plied his partner with eggs and coffee, Bill couldn't altogether give up hope. He even saw, looking

at it again, that if they were still out of prison and still solvent in seven or eight months from now, they would probably be feeling rather pleased with themselves. But the insuperable difficulty was, as it generally is, the immediate future.

He gave voice to these opinions.

"I'm afraid you'll never trust me again, Bill," answered George. "But as a matter of fact, if things only go right, my reputation alone will be worth twenty thousand to us at any time."

George's buoyancy was only a shade less alarming than George's despair, but perhaps it was just as well that he should go off in a hopeful mood, so Bill answered :

"Oh, we'll get round it all somehow. Only, mind, no more telegrams."

George laughed. It seemed impossible to believe that this was the man who had been calling himself all those names only a few hours ago.

"All right," he said. "Well, I must dash off now, but I'll ring you up if anything important happens. I suppose that's allowed ?"

So Bill was left behind to make the necessary preparations for meeting the four-thousand pound cheque, and when he had done this, he was free to go on worrying himself to death about everything else.

No message came through during the day, and no letter arrived on the Saturday morning. But about one o'clock, just as he was thinking of leaving the office, the telephone rang and he was told that Leicester wanted him. In the fullness of time a faint, wheezy voice made itself heard.

He pressed the receiver firmly against his ear.

"Hullo, George. Yes ?" he yelled.

"Is that you ?" asked the wheezy voice.

"Yes."

"I say, is it all right about my cheque ?"

"Yes, I've fixed it up. They've gone off with all our War Loan."

"What ?"

"I say it's all right." (*fortissimo*.)

"Oh, good!"

"I say, George."

"Hullo. I can't hear you."

Bill took a desperate chance and waggled the receiver rest. Desperate, because one never knows whether this will improve things, or only result in the connection being lost for ever.

"Is that better?" he shouted.

"Yes, that's a bit better."

• Courage seemed for once to have been rewarded.

"I say, how did you get on with Ledburys'?"

"What?"

Bill repeated himself, *largo maestoso*.

"I don't know," said George.

"What don't you know?"

"There's something dashed queer going on up here," said George's voice. "They do nothing but ask questions, and say they must think it over. I can't make out what's come over them. I can't get a definite answer of any kind. It's most——"

Here a female voice interrupted to enquire: "Will you have another three minutes?"

"Yes!" Bill shrieked. He had certainly not been speaking for more than one, but it never pays to argue with a telephone operator.

"What was that noise?" George was asking.

"She wanted to know if we'd have another three minutes."

"What?"

"Oh, never mind. Go on with what you were saying."

"What?"

"Oh, go on!"

But now a rhythmic sound, as of a whale or some other large animal snoring, began sweeping over the conversation in great, regular gusts. Whenever the creature paused to take breath, Bill and George both shouted at each other, but the intervals were too slight to be of any use. Once George was heard saying,

"infernal row," and once, "see them again on Monday," but beyond these two snatches nothing further could be distinguished.

In impotent fury Bill flew at the receiver-rest again.

"I am trying to get them for you," said a girl's voice.

"But look here! I was speaking to Leicester. I've been cut off."

"Will you please replace your receiver? I will *bring* you later."

He obeyed, but he hadn't really very much hope. Still he waited for another half hour, and then, as nothing happened, he gave it up and went off to lunch.

All Saturday afternoon and all Sunday to be got through somehow. What centuries it seemed since that week-end at Hare Hall.

About four o'clock on Sunday afternoon we find Bill, as he found himself, turning into Brook Street.

"Of course they're bound to be away," he was muttering; "but still, there's no harm in just passing by the house."

Not much good either, for the closed shutters told their unmistakable story. And the whole sombre, dignified, wealthy façade seemed only to emphasise what he already knew so much too well; the difference between people who live in Brook Street and people who live in bachelor flats.

"But, my dear good house," Bill addressed it, "your master may be a lord, but he's only a business man. I suppose you're aware of that?"

But no trace of expression disturbed its placid exterior. Steeped in the traditions of the eighteenth century, for the old house in Brook Street, rank would always be rank, and upstarts (by which it apparently meant Bill) would always be upstarts.

Yet he was spiritless enough to creep round into the mews at the back, where he spent nearly ten minutes gazing thoughtfully at the wrong set of windows.

2

Monday morning, for once so slow in its arrival, came at last ; and Bill hurried off to the City early, so as to be in plenty of time to receive his visitors from Paris. On his desk, however, was this letter, addressed to George.

“ *M. Georges Lucas,
Fraser and Company.*

Dear Sir,

I much regret to not to be possible to be present in London on Monday, but hoping to be arrived during same week and will communicate again.

*Agree, sir, etc.,
Antoine Kessler.”*

Not a word of explanation, but at the moment the postponement, whatever its cause, came as a considerable relief. Time, even a few days, might mean everything in juggling with their liabilities. Yet Bill would not have been Bill, if he had not spent nearly twenty minutes trying to read between the lines of this letter, before he finally wrote a formal acknowledgment and sent it out to be filed.

Later in the morning there arrived a picture postcard from George. “*Sorry we were cut off,*” he had scrawled on it. “*Am seeing L. again on Monday. Hope to go on to Nottingham during the afternoon.*”

Not much news here either, but the office routine served to keep Bill fairly well occupied all the morning, and with the help of this distraction he even achieved some success in putting his anxieties out of his mind. At half-past one he went out to one of his solitary, overcrowded lunches.

And then, shortly after three, just as he was getting into his stride with his afternoon’s work, the third and by far the most unexpected and mysterious note made its appearance.

“This come by ’and, sir,” said the office-boy ; “and they’re waiting for an answer.”

Bill pushed his other papers aside and opened it.

"*Dear Mr. Fraser,*" he read, "*I should esteem it as a great favour if you could make it convenient to call upon me here this afternoon.*"

"Yours very truly,
"Osman Girling."

Osman Girling? Bill looked at the envelope again.

Yes, his name was there in full, and there was no mistake about the address. Then he turned to the office-boy, seized with the sudden idea that he was playing some pointless kind of practical joke, but his vacant countenance bore no trace which could support this theory. And yet . . .

"When did this come?" he asked.

"Just now, sir."

"Did you see who brought it?"

"Yes, sir. Just a man, sir."

"All right. Ask him to wait a minute."

The boy went out again, slamming the door as usual. But for once Bill hardly heard it. What, in heaven's name, could Osman Girling want with him? Of course he knew the name, he had known it for years, but he would as soon have expected a summons of this sort from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. There must, surely, be some mistake.

He picked up his telephone and asked for the number at the head of the letter.

"Can I speak to Mr. Girling's secretary, please?" he enquired.

"Mr. Girling's secretary is speaking," said a man's voice.

"This is Mr. Alexander Fraser," Bill began. "I've just had a letter——"

The secretary broke in.

"Mr. Fraser? Oh, yes. Mr. Girling would be very glad if you could come round and see him. Will that be all right?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly. I'll come along now. But——"

"Right," said the secretary, and rang off.

Now what on earth . . . ? Bill sat back and stared again at the letter. "*Yours very truly,*" he read once more, "*Osman Girling.*"

There always are and there always have been a few names in the business hierarchy the sound of which conveys to those in the City the peculiar effect which this name had on Bill Fraser. Nobody knows how these men have started or whence they originally came. No reference book will enlighten you as to their activities. For though they are behind everything, they are in nothing. Mysterious and remote from all definable occupations or entanglements, they are known by all, but known to none. Yet if the chairman of a big trading corporation or financial trust should be seen playing golf with one of these men, and if at the end of the game that chairman should be seen to smile, then the corporation or trust's stock will instantly rise. If, on the other hand, the two should separate without this phenomenon being observable, then you were wise to sell quickly, while there is yet time ; for to-morrow it may be too late.

No directorship of the Bank of England, no place in the Honours List, will ever tempt one of these magical beings to abandon his aloofness and ally himself definitely with any financial party. On mystery and rumour they thrive, and to mystery and rumour they remain consecrated. Even their end is veiled in obscurity. If they die, then they do so by degrees, and woe betide the speculator who assumes too hastily that the corpse is cold. If they retire, it is only to increase the general uncertainty as to when and where they will re-emerge.

It is only away from the City that their fellow-creatures are allowed a glimpse of their tastes or natures. For in the conduct of their recreations they will tolerate and sometimes even welcome the public interest which they seek to avoid when engaged on business. Morgan Whitworth, you may remember, found time to run a racing stable, until that still unexplained affair which resulted in his trainer being charged with attempted

homicide. Blakistone—G. F. Blakistone—was credited with knowing more about old masters than anyone in Bond Street, though he never appeared in the sale room himself; nor in the dock, when "Conk" Lewin was caught outside his house with the Slingsby Gainsborough in the seat of his trousers. Even Osman Girling was known outside the City as a highly unsuccessful gambler in concert and opera seasons, though his losses seemed only to increase his reputation in Lombard Street.

What could a man of this calibre want with a partner in a humble firm of export agents, a firm which he could have bought outright at any moment that he chose, and never have noticed the difference in his pass-book? He would "esteem it as a great favour" if Mr. Fraser "could make it convenient" to go and see him, would he? Had the whole world, Bill wondered, signalled the present crisis in his business affairs by going mad? He suddenly remembered the messenger, and rang the bell.

"Tell the man who brought this letter," he said, when the boy appeared, "that I am going round myself with the answer, at once."

"Very good, sir."

"And I don't know when I shall be back, but if I'm going to be very late, I'll try and telephone."

The boy again withdrew, and after one last look round his dark little room, such as a man may be permitted when he is setting out on an unknown adventure, Bill picked up his hat and went forth.

Mr. Girling had addressed his letter from Imperial Buildings, without mentioning number or floor, and in ten minutes or less Bill was searching for his name on the board in the entrance hall. But though his scrutiny was painstaking and exhaustive, no such name was to be seen.

In this unexpected difficulty, he ventured to interpose between the hall-porter and his study of the *Evening News*.

"Is Mr. Girling's office in this building?" he asked.

The porter dropped his newspaper and sprang to attention.

"Have you an appointment, sir?" he enquired.

His threatening and penetrating glance made Bill realise that Osman Girling's lair was better guarded than most.

"Yes," he answered, and he waved the letter at the porter.

"Will you please step this way?"

The porter's attitude was still so tinged with suspicion that Bill almost expected him to make the suggestion that he should be blindfolded, but perhaps he counted on the darkness of the stairs and corridors to serve this purpose equally well. In two or three minutes they arrived outside a door on which was painted "No Exit."

"Just a moment, sir," said the porter. "What name shall I say?"

Bill told him.

The porter knocked gently and went in, and for five more minutes Bill tried to amuse himself by reading a set of directions which were to be followed in case of fire. Then at last the door opened again, and a bald young man stood in the entrance.

"Mr. Fraser?" he suggested.

Bill bowed.

"Will you please come in? Mr. Girling won't be a moment."

Bill followed the bald young man into a small ante-chamber, containing a desk, several chairs and a couple of telephones. To his surprise, there was no sign of the porter. Had the body been disposed of so quickly, then? He was irresistibly reminded of the fable in Aesop about the footprints which were detected by the fox as always approaching and never leaving the lion's den.

"Will you please take a seat?" continued the bald young man. "May I take your hat? Thanks. Have you seen the *Times*? Oh, you have." (Why, Bill wondered, were people who are kept waiting for appoint-

ments, never credited with having read the *Times* ?) "Mr. Girling will be ready in a moment," he repeated, by way of conclusion.

With these words the bald young man instantly resumed his seat, and became feverishly occupied with those rather showy portions of his duty which private secretaries always reserve for the purpose of impressing visitors. The desk fairly frothed with papers ; drawers were opened and shut ; rubber stamps banged furiously and envelopes were shied with unerring skill into a basket balanced on the radiator. Once he suddenly stooped, and pulling a speaking tube from some hidden recess, became engaged in a long, whispered conversation with, Bill suspected, nobody.

Yet, in spite of this suspicion, Bill found himself no more proof against the moral effect of this display than anyone else. The longer it went on, the more nervous he became, and when at last a buzzer went off somewhere behind him, he nearly leapt out of his skin.

"Ah," said the bald young man. "Mr. Girling is ready now. Will you come this way ?" And he rose and opened an inner door.

"Mr. Fraser," he announced, and forthwith Bill entered the presence.

The room in which he found himself was about as unlike any of the ordinary varieties of City office as anything he had ever seen. Its general decoration suggested at first sight a private sitting-room in an expensive hotel, but a private sitting-room on which some more than usually determined tenant had succeeded to some extent in impressing his own individuality. The thick carpet, the heavy damask curtains revealing further curtains of patterned lace, the tapestry-covered chairs and sofas, all these suggested the hotel. But the grand piano in the corner, the vases full of flowers, the revolving bookcase filled with novels and surmounted with framed photographs, all served to introduce a fresh and confusing element. A fragile ormolu writing-table in a dark corner was the nearest approach, and a pretty distant one at that, to any visible sign of the conven-

tional office paraphernalia. The whole atmosphere was heavy with a mixed, and by no means attractive scent of roses and cigars.

A short, unhealthy-looking gentleman was reclining on a sofa, with a little tea-table by his side on which a silver kettle was gently steaming, and the only other occupant of the room was a tall, grey-haired man, smartly dressed in a Stock Exchange outfit, who was standing with his back to the fireplace.

As Bill made his entrance and the door closed behind him, the man on the sofa struggled to his feet and extended a hand.

"Ah, Mr. Fraser," he said, in a dry, toneless voice. "Very good of you to come. I hope you will forgive me for asking you to see me here, but the fact is—er—my lumbago—ah . . ."

"Oh, not at all," answered Bill, a little awkwardly, and they shook hands.

"A—ah," grunted Mr. Girling, and subsided again on to his sofa.

"Do you know Sir Donald Hammersmith?" he went on, and Bill found himself shaking hands with the grey-haired man.

"Will you have some tea, Mr. Fraser?" added Mr. Girling.

"No, thank you very much."

Not at half-past three, if it was all the same to them.

"A cigar?" suggested Mr. Girling. "Hammersmith, where are the cigars?"

The grey-haired man proffered a silver box, filled with what looked like young torpedoes.

"No, thanks very much," Bill repeated. After dinner yes, perhaps; but not now, in this stuffy, overheated room.

"Ah, you don't smoke?" said Mr. Girling. "Well, well; never mind. Sit down, won't you. Hammersmith, take your hat off that chair. That's it. Thanks. Now, then."

He felt in his waistcoat pocket, extracted a gold pencil-case, and began swinging it by a ring at the end,

gazing all the while at the circling point. And then, just as Bill was beginning to think that no one was ever going to speak again, he went on.

"Sir Donald has just come back from Leicester," he said.

"Oh, yes?" answered Bill. And he looked at Sir Donald, rather as though he were expecting to see some outward evidence of the truth of this statement. Naturally he saw nothing of the sort, but he did see him making a kind of signal to Mr. Girling, as though he were reminding him of something.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Girling a little impatiently, and then turning to Bill again, he continued:

"Sir Donald and I have got a proposal to make to you, Mr. Fraser. But perhaps before we go any further, it would be just as well to make certain of one thing. We are making it in confidence, and we should like to have your undertaking that it remains confidential. Is that—ah—agreeable to you?"

"I take it you mean a business proposal?" Bill asked.

"Yes, yes," said Sir Donald. "Purely business."

"Then I imagine that my partner is included in this confidence?" Bill suggested.

Mr. Girling and Sir Donald glanced at each other quickly.

"Of course," said Mr. Girling.

"Of course; of course," echoed Sir Donald.

"I have no objection, then," said Bill. He had had a wild thought of entering a stipulation that there should be nothing illegal about the proposal, but one couldn't really go quite as far as that.

"It's about this order," said Mr. Girling, his eyes fixed again on his pencil case, "from Finland."

Bill gave a start. How on earth had these two strangers come to learn of his dealings with Mr. Stromberg, and what in heaven's name had it got to do with them? Could George have been up to more of his pranks? Or were they talking about something quite separate?

"Do you mean——" he began.

"Your order for hosiery goods," said Sir Donald.

It was the same order, then.

"This is the position," Mr. Girling went on. "We want you to place the whole of that order with"—here he consulted a slip of paper which was trapped under the edge of his saucer—"yes, with Peter Miller and Sons."

"Of Nottingham," added Sir Donald from the hearth-rug.

"I beg your pardon," said Bill, "but I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

He certainly didn't. Of course he knew Millers' by name, as an old-established manufacturing firm; but it was something quite outside his experience to be sent for by a complete stranger and told how to carry on his business.

"If you will do this," Mr. Girling went on, disregarding his visitor's obvious amazement, "we should be prepared to pay you an extra commission on the order. Of course it would be understood that neither my name, nor Sir Donald's, was brought into the affair in any way. The amount of commission would be a matter for settlement between us by agreement."

With a wrench, Bill jerked his eyes away from the mesmeric gleaming of that gold pencil-case.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid I still don't quite understand."

Very slowly and carefully Mr. Girling repeated his extraordinary proposal.

"But—but," said Bill, "I don't think you can appreciate how we are placed. We've never dealt with Millers' before. We've got to have credit for this order; we can't go through with it otherwise. Quite apart from any other objections, how do you imagine that we should get six or eight months' credit from people who don't know us?"

"I don't think you would find any difficulty over that," said Mr. Girling.

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean that I think you would find Messrs. Miller quite prepared to meet you."

Bill scowled at the carpet in bewildered thought. It seemed so impossible to associate with the scale on which he knew that Osman Girling worked, the necessity for his adopting these strange means to direct the Stromberg order into one particular channel. Besides, if, as would now appear, he were connected with Millers' in some way, and Frasers' drew their commission twice over, where were the other side going to get their profit from? However, he must say something.

"May I ask if you or Sir Donald Hammersmith are acting on behalf of this firm?" he enquired.

Mr. Girling permitted himself an impatient movement with his head.

"No, no," he answered. "I have already said that our names mustn't come into this at all; not at any stage."

"It is such an unusual suggestion," Bill continued, still hoping that if he gave himself time, he might see what the point of the whole thing was. "Would there be any objection to your telling me why you want the order to go to these particular people?"

"I'm afraid there would be," said Mr. Girling, with a kind of grim finality. "Now, Mr. Fraser, this is a straightforward business proposition, and one which, as it seems to me, is very much to your advantage. If you look at it like that, I am sure you will see that there is every reason why you should do as we suggest." He closed his hand suddenly over the pencil-case, and fixed his visitor with a piercing, if slightly bilious eye.

Now "straightforward" was the very last word which it would have occurred to Bill to apply to this proposal; and if, as Mr. Girling said, the advantages in it were obvious, there was on the other hand a general air of disadvantage about the mystery and secrecy at the back of it all which was far from attractive.

"There's another pretty serious objection," he replied. "As you know so much about my business, you probably also know that my partner is up in the Midlands at this

very moment, making arrangements to place this order with firms whom we know. How can I tell that the whole thing isn't already fixed up?"

"You can be quite certain of that," put in Sir Donald from his post by the fireplace.

Oh, he could, could he? George had undoubtedly been right about the general queerness of things at Leicester, but Bill could still see no kind of meaning behind it all, and until he did, he was dashed if he was going on with it. Osman Girling's reputation would not for one second support the theory that he was making this proposal for any one's advantage but his own. "Perhaps," thought Bill, "if I refuse, he'll come out in the open. Anyhow, I'm certainly not going to accept unless he does."

He rose to his feet.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Girling," he said, "but if you want a definite answer to-day, then I'm afraid I must refuse. It's very good of you, I'm sure, to interest yourself in my affairs, but I should prefer to stick to the ordinary lines of business, if it is possible to do so."

Sir Donald had opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Girling checked him with a movement of his hand.

"The matter is urgent, Mr. Fraser," he said; "but urgency is a relative term. To-day is Monday. My offer will remain open until four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon. Don't let us say anything final to-day; very likely you would prefer to talk it over with your partner."

He stretched out his hand, and Bill heard the buzzer ringing in the next room. The audience was over.

This, he realised afterwards, would have been the moment for him to leave. But though he blamed himself for it later, we can surely understand how it was that, instead of this, he embarked on a kind of halting apology.

"I don't want—I wouldn't wish——" he began; but Mr. Girling brushed his words aside.

"That's all right, Mr. Fraser," he said. "I never

expect other people to make up their minds as quickly as I do. I'm quite used to it."

Offensive brute !

Bill suddenly found the bald-headed secretary standing by his side, holding out his hat. Mr. Girling, with his eyes turned towards heaven, seemed, like the frog-footman whom he so much resembled, already unconscious of his existence. Sir Donald Hammersmith was helping himself to another cigar.

"Good afternoon," said Bill shortly, and, without waiting for them to decide whether they would answer or not, he took his hat and went straight out, through the antechamber, into the corridor.

He walked back to Pardon Court and spent the rest of the afternoon seated at his desk, ruffling his hair, and entering in turn a thousand and one blind alleys of profitless conjecture. And each time that he emerged from one of these, he began wondering again how otherwise he could or should have conducted his share in that amazing interview.

"I give it up," he said finally. "I think I'll walk home."

Perhaps he had a faint hope that the air on the Embankment might blow away the mist which seemed to be piling up thicker and thicker between him and reality.

3

On the narrow table in his passage-hall there was a piece of paper, decorated with his housekeeper's handwriting.

"*Will you please ring up Miss Grahame—Mayfair 438.*"

He shouted down the passage.

"Mrs. Whalley !"

Mrs. Whalley appeared.

"What time did this telephone message come ?"

"I couldn't say the exact time, sir," she answered in her best witness-box manner.

"Never mind the exact time. Was it this morning or this afternoon ?"

"It was before lunch, sir."

"And didn't—— Oh, well, never mind. Thanks very much."

Of course if the fool of a woman had had any sense, she would have rung him up at the office at once, instead of letting him waste all the afternoon like this ; but then, she never did have any sense. Or was it his own fault for not confiding in her more ? He left her and dashed to the telephone.

"Hullo ! Is that Mayfair 438 ? Can I speak to Miss Grahame, please ? Mr. Fraser. No, *Fraser*. Thank you."

Of course he'd missed her. Why, it must have been nearly six hours since she had rung him up, and the whole of that time she must have been thinking him ruder and ruder. Old fool, Mrs. Whalley. Somebody's footsteps. They're going to say she's out.

"Hullo, Bill. Is that you ?"

She was in.

"Hullo," he answered.

"Where on earth have you been all day ?"

"At my office. And I walked home."

"Oh, I see. I didn't dare ring you up there."

How unlike Wog.

"But you must always ring me up there," said Bill. "Promise me you will."

He must have overdone it, for she laughed.

"Look here, Bill. Are you doing anything to-night ?"

"No, nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing at all."

"Well, look here. Can you dine here at a quarter past eight and take me to the Stewarts' dance ? I've promised to bring some one, so you must."

In this life one doesn't often get a second chance, but his detestable conscience answered before he could stop it.

"I can't dance, you know," it said. "At least, not in the way that people do it in these days."

"That doesn't matter a bit. I don't suppose there'll

be any room to dance really. You will come, won't you ? ”

“ Rather. Thanks most awfully ;— of course I will.”

“ A quarter past eight, then ? ”

“ Yes, rather. I say, how awfully——”

But she had gone.

— And now to Hell with Fraser and Company, and Lemaître, and Stromberg, and Ledburys', and Osman Girling, and the whole collection of worries and troubles. He was going to spend the evening with Leslie. What, suddenly, did anything else in the world matter ? “ Mrs. Whalley ! I'm dining out. Yes, dining out.” What fun it all was ! Now where were his white waist-coats ?

And gloves ? Did people still wear gloves ? Better take a pair in his pocket in case they did. He flew into his bedroom and began searching at the backs of all the drawers. Yes ; his luck had turned at last. Here was a pair of real, pre-war, white gloves. An actual pair ; and with buttons on them too.

Gradually the unusual spectacle of Alexander Fraser, Esquire, in his full dress clothes began to take form and substance out of a chaos of shirts and socks and hair-brushes, and by a quarter to eight the vision was complete. He had even unearthed from an old portmanteau in the dark cupboard outside Mrs. Whalley's room, a genuine, collapsible opera-hat. Either his head had swollen or this hat had contracted since he had last had it on some time in 1913 or 14, and it became clear that if he were going to wear it at all seriously, he would probably bear the marks for some days. But he would be going about in taxis and motors all the evening, and it would do quite well if he carried it carelessly in one hand.

Now, then ; from the flat to Brook Street in a cab ; say five minutes—well, say ten minutes, then. By Jove, he hoped she meant that about his not having to dance.

Yet there must have been something wrong about his calculations, for the taxi set him down outside Lord

Longwood's house when his watch told him that it was still only six minutes past eight. He'd better walk about for a bit. It was a pity that he couldn't put that hat on, but still, it was a warm evening and it couldn't be helped. He walked to within a few yards of the corner of Bond Street, and then came back again, very slowly. Only ten minutes past still. The worst of it was that he had already had to decline offers of services from seven taxi-drivers, and if he went on tempting them much longer, it might lead to difficulties. So he waited on the doorstep for another two minutes, hoping that he was not being observed all the time in the little mirror which was fastened to one of the basement windows, and at last, at twelve minutes and thirty-five seconds past the hour, he rang the bell.

The door opened immediately, and he had an uneasy feeling that the footman had been watching him through the letter-box. Never mind, he was in the house at last. He was disrobed and handed over to the butler, who allowed himself a faint smile of condescending recognition, and then preceded him up the stairs. Yards and yards of stairs, with the curious low treads which one finds in rich people's houses. He was shown into a vast drawing-room. "Miss Grahame will be down in a few minutes, sir." "Thank you." The butler executed a brief fantasia on the electric switches by the door, the general effect of which was to leave the lighting pretty much as it was, and withdrew. Bill finds that he daren't sit down, even if he wanted to, so he walks about, inspecting the room.

That picture over the mantelpiece must be Leslie's mother. He didn't remember her, of course, for she had died when he was only six; but she must have been rather a beauty too. But not a patch on Leslie. And here, on the opposite wall, is old Andrew Grahame. But from this portrait Bill turns away quickly; the artist has caught that terrifying expression much too well for his comfort. There is some music scattered over the top of the piano. Mozart, Holst and a song called "Zim-zam Blues." Leslie's taste, if this is

Leslie's taste, seems as catholic as his own. He suddenly wondered what kind of music Mr. Girling played. No, he didn't; he wouldn't think about Mr. Girling.

Some one was coming down the stairs now. Bill's fingers dashed to a final adjustment of his tie, but his hands seemed to have passed out of his control. Why——

"Is that you, Bill?"

She had come into the room. They were shaking hands. My word! She's lovelier than ever.

"It's terribly good of you to have come. I hope you won't hate it."

Good? Hate it? Bill heard himself mumbling something about something being ripping.

"I ought really to have waited for you to call."

"But I did call. At least, I tried to call yesterday but the house was shut up."

"Did you? I only came back this morning, and Papa and Mr. Harvey have gone off to Leicester, so I'm afraid we shall be alone."

Was everyone in the world at Leicester, then? Bill's determination to forget about his business underwent a severe strain. But what did it matter where the others were, as long as they weren't here? He mumbled something further on the lines of his previous mumble.

"Do you know the Stewarts?" Leslie was asking.

"No, I'm afraid not."

"They live in Grosvenor Street, so we shan't have far to go."

Dash the Stewarts! They might have lived a bit further off.

"Did you mean that about my not having to dance?" he was just beginning to ask; but he was interrupted by the return of the butler, and they went down to the dining-room.

The little round table with its four lighted candles seemed set in a circle of impenetrable gloom. Leslie and Bill took their places at right angles to one another, and the dinner began. Menservants emerged at intervals from the outer darkness, removing and replacing various

dishes, but Bill had no idea what he was eating and scarcely any idea what he was saying. Those good resolutions taken in his bedroom at Hare Hall seemed blown to the winds, and Leslie by candle light was all the food and drink that he wanted.

And to think that some great hulking brute with twenty-thousand a year would some day have the exquisite bliss of dining like this any evening that he chose. The thought nearly made him choke. Yet what could he do to stop it? She might know the fellow already, or, more horrible idea still, she might be going to meet him at this dance to-night for the first time. In an hour, at the outside, they would be in a crowded room full of strangers; a few more, and this one evening would be over for ever. Oh, damn money, by all means; but damn time still more.

"About this dance," Bill resumed, as he followed his hostess into the drawing-room again; "you do understand that I can't do it, don't you?"

"Can't do what?"

"Dance."

"Of course you can."

There you are. He knew it. She had lured him here (not that he wasn't only too ready to be lured) by telling him that it didn't matter whether he could dance or not, and already she had changed her ground, and was telling him that he could, and (inferentially) must.

"But I haven't been to a dance since programmes went out," he protested. "In my dancing days we used to do the lancers still. And we'd never even heard of a saxophone."

Leslie turned on him impatiently.

"Why will you always talk as if you were fifty?" she said. "Don't you see how rude it is, considering that we were brought up together? No, I want to talk to you seriously; I've been thinking about it a lot since I saw you. Why must you go out of your way to be so middle-aged?"

"Middle-aged! Me? Why, I'm only twenty-nine," Bill expostulated. "What's more, I'm only just twenty-nine."

"I know that," said Leslie. "Then why not be it?"

"But what's wrong with me? I'm not fat. I'm not even bald."

"You're worse than that," she said.

"Impossible."

"Yes, you are. You're self-satisfied."

This was too much.

"I swear before heaven," said Bill, "that a more horribly unjust statement has never been made. If you only knew. If you only *knew*."

"Very well. We'll withdraw 'self-satisfied.' But you're—oh, I don't know. But why don't you dance? Why do you go on spending all your life in that silly little office? Why couldn't you come and see me until I took the trouble to write to you? I know you wasted five years in the army. All right; so did a lot of other people. But why sit down under it? You haven't lost those years really, unless you keep on telling yourself you've lost them."

So much criticism, whether true or false, could, it seemed to Bill, never before have been crowded into a minute. He was as breathless as Leslie by the time she had finished.

"But—but—I can't help it about the dancing," he gasped. "Lots of fellows don't dance. And how could I tell that you wanted me to come and see you, and——"

"I didn't," Leslie interrupted.

"No, no, of course not. And as for my silly little office, yes, you're quite right. But I'm going to change all that. I'm doing all sorts of things now. We're lashing out, George Lucas and I are, in all kinds of directions. You see if we aren't."

In the intoxication of Leslie's presence, this seemed a perfectly fair way of describing what had a few hours ago looked much more like a series of chuckle-headed blunders. And it went down so well, too.

"Are you really?" said Leslie, with her eyes shining. "Oh, I *am* glad. I withdraw everything. I've misunderstood you—I've been terribly unfair. You must

forgive me, I—I know what I'll do. I'll teach you to dance."

"What, now?"

"Yes. Come on. We'll turn on the gramophone."

She flew into a dark corner of the room and began winding furiously at the handle of a big cabinet machine. "Turn on the top left-hand switch by the door," she ordered, and in response to Bill's efforts the big, cut-glass pendant in the middle of the ceiling burst into a flood of light.

"Now, then," said Leslie. "This is a fox-trot. Listen first; I want you to get the rhythm." She stood in front of the monstrous cabinet, emphasising the time with one gently-moving finger, and looking, to Bill, like—well, like Leslie. Comparisons seemed suddenly so ineffective.

"Have you got it?" she asked presently.

Bill had no idea what it was that he was supposed to have got, but he nodded.

"Come on, then," said Leslie.

And to his astonishment, indeed to his utter stupefaction, he actually found himself dancing. And not only dancing, but enjoying it.

"That's splendid," said his hostess. "Wait a minute, I'll start the record again. Now. then. Like this."

And they did it again.

"What do you mean by telling me you couldn't dance?" Leslie asked.

"But it's so much easier than it looks. Is that all?"

"No, not nearly all. We're only just beginning. Now watch my feet."

And so the lesson went on. Every few minutes one or the other had to dash to the gramophone and either wind it up, or put in a fresh needle, or change the record. Bill hadn't taken so much exercise immediately after dinner for years, but he was enjoying himself tremendously. It came into his mind that a certain feeling of contempt which he had hitherto had for dancing men had after all been a very silly kind of prejudice. If it were always like this, no wonder they

did it. But he was to discover during the evening that it was far from being always like this.

"Now we'll have *He tried to call me baby*," said Leslie presently, picking up a fresh record.

"Is that the name of the dance or the name of the tune?" asked Bill.

"The tune, idiot."

But it had hardly started when he called out:

"I know that tune."

"You know it?"

"Yes, it's the tune you sang in the garden at Hare Hall. Don't you remember asking me what its name was?"

"Of course. So I did. I asked Mr. Harvey afterwards, and he got me the record."

Oh, he did, did he? Dash Mr. Harvey's eyes! Was there no limit to his efficiency, then?

"It's got awfully good words," Leslie added. "He got me the music too."

"Oh."

"Yes."

She began to sing the awfully good words. If I were to set them down in cold blood—and I could if I chose—they would doubtless appear the extreme and most exaggerated limit of inanity and bad grammar. It would be useless either to deny, in cold blood, that what slight meaning they possessed was both vulgar and unpleasing. But, at the time, Bill found nothing to criticise. How could he, with Leslie looking like that?

"Now, then," she called out. "Chorus!"

He found himself trying to sing with her.

"He tried to call me baby,
He——"

But no. I'm not going to quote those words. In the chill severity of print they would inevitably convey the wrong kind of suggestion. And in any case Bill had scarcely got more than halfway through them, when he suddenly saw the butler standing in the doorway. So did Leslie, and their song ceased.

"The car is here, miss," he was saying.

"The car? Good heavens, what's the time?"

The butler consulted his watch.

"Five minutes past ten, miss."

"And I promised to be early. How awful! Bill, go and get your things at once. I've a strange feeling that my hair's coming down, but I'll be with you in a minute. Slater, be an angel and put the records away—I must fly."

Bill left Slater being an angel, and went down into the hall, where he helped himself into his coat. His fear of the unknown party was returning now that he found himself alone, but he fought hard against it, seeking courage of a sort by humming *He tried to call me baby*. In a surprisingly short time Leslie, wearing a red cloak, re-appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Hold these a minute," she said, as she reached the hall; and she handed Bill a pair of long gloves and a chain bag. "I think my shoe's coming off now." She put her foot on a chair to execute the necessary adjustment.

This, Bill was thinking, was how Leslie and that other infernal fellow would go out in the evenings. Perhaps he would get tired of holding her bag. Yes, he would probably be the kind of brute who always complained of being kept waiting. A malevolent look passed across that usually kindly countenance.

"If you'll promise to wait and walk home with me," said Leslie, as the car moved off, "I'll tell Bradley not to come back. He'll hate me like poison, if I keep him out of bed for a drive like this."

Such an attitude of mind seemed to Bill inconceivable in Bradley or anyone else, but of course he promised to see her home, and in another moment they had arrived outside the Stewarts' house. Bradley jumped down, ran round the back of the car, and opened the door.

The next incident took Bill completely by surprise. For hardly had he crossed the strip of carpet and entered the hall of the house, than a cluster of insufferable young

men, all of whose dress coats fitted them, in his opinion, a great deal better than any gentleman's coat ought to fit him, seemed to spring from every direction and surround his companion. As far as he could make out, they all called her "Leslie" and all claimed any number of dances from three upwards. Seldom had he disliked a collection of his fellow-creatures more.

But, in view of this demonstration, could it really be true that she had had to fall back on him as her only available escort? A cad's query; he tried, and almost managed to drive it out of his mind, but traces remained for the rest of the evening to puzzle and worry him, to lift him up at one moment and dash him down again at the next.

But for his undertaking to see Leslie home, it is doubtful if Bill would have stayed very long at the Stewarts' dance. For in the first place, since he knew nobody, he was naturally seized on by Mrs. Stewart, or possibly Lady Stewart, as fair prey for her less attractive guests. And in the second place, even with these unfortunates he was conscious that he was not going down as well as might be hoped. His dancing, which had seemed so skilful and effective in the drawing-room at Brook Street, went all to pieces when put to this fresh test. Time and again his unmanageable partners besought him to get them an ice, or became overcome with sudden and suspicious fatigue; and few of them put in a second appearance when he fought his way to his assignations with them outside the drawing-room door. It is true that one fat girl, with unnaturally red arms, did actually survive three rounds, but he couldn't help feeling that she must be a little weak in the head; her conversation certainly suggested this. More and more he was driven to walking about the ground floor, trying to pretend that he was looking for some one, or killing time by long-drawn-out dealings with a cigarette and a box of matches.

But twice he was snatched up by Leslie into the clouds, and each time it was more than clear that she had cut somebody else's dance to come to his assistance,

for they performed to an accompaniment of scowls and protests from his disappointed rivals.

"But it's your fault, Bill," she said, as they made their way round the room the second time. "Why didn't you ask me to dance with you?"

"I was going to," he protested. "I was really; but all those other fellows got in first."

"You shouldn't have let them," she answered. "You ought to have asked me in the car."

"Ought I?"

"Listen to him," said Leslie.

"I'll know what to do next time," he suggested; but she only laughed, and began to sing.

"When may I have another?" he persisted.

"There won't be any more," she said, smiling at some one else as she spoke. "We're going home in three from now."

"Oh."

But they didn't. At the end of the next three dances Bill emerged from the retreat which he had discovered at the back of the hall, and sought for her in vain; and when the music began again, he found that she had escaped him somehow and was dancing with a detestable fellow with black crimped hair and a stupid little moustache. And after this for hours and hours, as it seemed to him, he kept on re-appearing like a gloomy ghost at the beginning of each dance, only to see her dash past with another partner, and twice out of every three times with the moustache.

His little stock of ruses for pretending that he was doing anything but hanging about had long since been exhausted. Even the waiters no longer troubled to break off their conversation when his restless wanderings brought him periodically into the dining-room. More and more guests took their departure into the night, and the offensive way in which they all seemed to know one another accentuated his loneliness to an almost intolerable pitch. The unwelcome thought could not be much longer resisted that Leslie had forgotten all about him. But he'd see her home, if he had to wait until

breakfast, and he grimly lighted himself yet another cigarette.

And at last, just as he was on the point of falling asleep on his chair in the hall, she re-appeared in her red cloak.

"Come along," she said. "We're going home."

Bill started to his feet, and as he did so, became aware that the man with the crimped hair was hovering behind her.

"Let me drive you back," he was saying. "I've got my car just outside."

For a terrible moment Leslie seemed to be weighing this offer in her mind, and then she said :

"No, thank you, Tommy. Mr. Fraser has promised to see me home."

Tommy gave Bill a look as though he were some strange and monstrous animal.

"Oh, all right," he said, and left them.

Bill pulled his hat and coat out of the red-baize rack without waiting for assistance, and hurried after Leslie into the street. Though he had achieved a technical victory over the man with the crimped hair, he had an unpleasant feeling that he hadn't deserved it, and, worse than this, that Leslie knew that he hadn't deserved it.

She said nothing when he joined her, and they walked to the corner in silence, while he tried to catch a glimpse of her expression in the light from the street-lamps.

Finally he said :

"I say, you were a long time."

"Was I?"

Her tone didn't encourage him to pursue the subject, but a few steps further on he tried again.

"I say," he said, "I'm—I'm awfully sorry I didn't—I didn't . . ."

She didn't help him, and he gave it up.

Then, as they turned the second corner back into Brook Street, he made one more attempt.

"Did Miss Lorden ever find her sponge?" he asked.

"Her sponge?" repeated Leslie, stopping dead.

"Yes. She rang me up about it." He repeated Wog's story of her loss.

"Wog's mad," said Leslie when he had finished, and she moved on again.

"Did she tell you anything else?" she asked, as they reached her doorstep.

"No," said Bill. "Nothing else. She said she was going to tell me something, but she seemed annoyed because I hadn't recognised her voice. So she didn't."

"Oh," said Leslie. Then she held out her hand. "Good-night," she added. "Thank you very much for looking after me."

"But I've enjoyed it most tremendously. Oh, Leslie, I'm—I didn't mean—I mean—I wish—I . . ."

She waited patiently, looking more beautiful and more unapproachable than ever, but he gave it up. Whatever he had been going to say, he couldn't finish it.

"It's all right, Bill," she said, when his last disjointed sounds had died away. "And you can put your hat on," she added.

"But I can't," said Bill, in a wretched, sulky voice. "It doesn't fit." He gave a brief demonstration.

And all at once she was the Leslie that she had been before they had started for that ill-omened party. A peal of laughter came from her lovely throat.

"My poor Bill," she said; "there never was anyone like you, and I don't suppose there ever will be."

And slipping her latchkey into the door, she disappeared inside the dimly-lighted hall.

For five minutes Bill remained staring fixedly in the direction of the knocker. And then faint murmurs might have been heard proceeding from him.

The first murmur took the form of an old-fashioned, florid, British swear-word, uttered, however, without a trace of the emphasis which one might reasonably expect to find associated with it.

Then he said :

"I'm afraid there's no mistake."

Then he said :

"I suppose I oughtn't to have come this evening, really."

Then he said :

"Hell. This is worse than people make out."

And then, slowly at first, but with gathering speed, he began walking back towards his flat, occupied all the time in a silent dialogue with some disembodied spirit which seemed to have taken temporary possession of one half of his mind.

"But how do you know that she isn't engaged, or as good as engaged to some one else?" asked this impertinent disputant, as they reached the corner of Berkeley Square.

"I wish you'd keep your remarks to yourself," said Bill.

"Of course," said the spirit, quite undisturbed by this rebuff, "you *would* wait till you're nearly thirty and on the verge of insolvency, and then go and choose a millionaire's daughter."

Bill tried to look the other way. A difficult thing to do when you are being addressed from inside your own head.

"If you really want my advice——" began the spirit.

"I don't," snapped Bill. "What is it?"

"You'll wait a bit and see what happens."

"Do you call that advice?" asked Bill coldly.

"Well, perhaps not. But let me ask you something."

"Well?"

"Are you happy?"

"I don't know."

"Are you excited?"

"Yes. Tremendously."

"Well, what more do you want?"

"What more do I—— My dear sir, must I begin explaining all over again?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Oh, very well, then," said Bill disgustedly. "Now supposing you clear out."

But the spirit was not so easily exorcised as all this. It sat on the end of his bed all night and made more

unhelpful, uninspiring and platitudinous remarks than any spirit has ever made.

And it would *not* let him go to sleep.

4

When Bill returned to the office after lunch the next day, he was surprised to find George waiting for him.

"Hullo," he said. "When did you get back?"

"Came up this morning," said George. "I say, you're looking pretty cheap. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. What's the news from Leicester and Nottingham?"

"I haven't been to Nottingham," said George; "and the news from Leicester is so dashed odd, that I thought I'd better come back and see you."

"Why, what's happened?"

"What hasn't?" answered George. "I've seen Ledburys' three times. On Friday they as good as booked the order, and were going to give us all the credit we wanted. On Saturday they began hedging and said they wanted time to think it over. That was when I rang you up. Then I went back yesterday afternoon, and after beating about the bush for a bit, the old man said he was very sorry but his machines were full, and I must take the business somewhere else. That," George added reflectively, "was an infernal lie."

"What time did you see them yesterday?" asked Bill.

"Late-ish. About six I should think. Why?"

Plenty of time for Mr. Girling to have given his instructions, if indeed this were the explanation.

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Bill. "There've been some odd things going on in London too. First of all, look at this." He produced M. Kessler's letter.

"Well," said George. "That's all right, I suppose; isn't it?"

"I suppose so. I was rather hoping to hear from him again to-day, but still, as you say, I expect it's all right."

"Of course it is," said George.

"Well, then, what do you make of this?" And this time Bill handed over the note from Osman Girling.

George gasped.

"Good Lord!" he said. "What next?"

"That's how it struck me," answered Bill.

"Did you go?"

"Yes."

"Well, what was it?"

Bill told him. "I'd no idea where you were," he concluded, "or of course I'd have written all this to you last night."

"That's all right," said George, and he got up and began pacing up and down the room.

"This Sir Donald What's-his-name," he added presently; "what sort of a brute was he to look at?"

"Tall," said Bill. "Grey hair. Overdressed."

"That's him," said George. "He was in the room all the time I was talking to old Ledbury on Saturday morning. Ledbury introduced him as one of his directors, but I never caught his name."

"Well, I may be wrong," ventured Bill, "but it seems a bit funny that one of Ledburys' directors should try and bribe me to place a big order with somebody else."

"Dashed funny," said George.

"And I'll tell you another funny thing," he added, after a moment's thought. "I heard this quite by chance from a man I was talking to at the hotel. Peter Miller's have been feeling a bit rocky lately. Of course with their name and reputation they'll probably pull round without much trouble; but all the same, if what this fellow told me was true, they'd be the last people to want to stand out of their money just at present. What do you make of that?"

Bill cudgelled his exhausted brains.

"Nothing," he answered at length. "But I don't like it."

"And I don't like it either. I'm glad you told old Girling what you did. Hang it, we may be in a bit of a hole; I don't say we're not; but if he thinks he can butt in and make us place our orders wherever he chooses, then all I can say is that he's jolly well wrong. There

are lots of other manufacturers besides Ledbury and Miller. But I must say, I wish old Kessler would buck up and come over. If we've got to take that show over inside a month, we shall want to go into things with him pretty thoroughly."

Bill recalled his wandering thoughts.

"Perhaps they'd know something at their London office," he said. "It's quite possible that Kessler has told them more than he's told us."

"That's an idea," George conceded. "Let's ring 'em up."

He reached for the telephone while Bill hunted up the number, but ten minutes later they were compelled to accept the operator's statement that there was no reply.

"They've got a small staff here, I know," said George. "It's quite likely that they shut the place up in the afternoons, when there's nothing much doing."

"Oh, quite," answered Bill.

But he wondered if it were.

"About this grey-haired blighter," said George suddenly; "I suppose you've looked up his record. Did you find anything?"

"Yes, here he is," said Bill, and he opened the office *Who's Who*, where he had turned down the corner of a page.

"H'm," murmured George, glancing through the paragraph. "This doesn't tell one much. Ex-manager of something I can't pronounce in South America, and Director of Blanket Supplies in the Ministry of Munitions for the last two years of the war. What I want to know is what he's doing now."

"I can tell you one other thing about him," said Bill, looking up from a second red-covered work of reference. "He wasn't a director of Ledburys' when this book went to press. In fact he wasn't a director of anything."

"Well, he's not going to become a director of me," answered George, with some violence. "And that's flat. Now, then, let's have a look at this correspondence with the bank."

Messrs. Fraser and Company's office hours, so far as the two partners were concerned, generally drew to a close in the neighbourhood of half-past five, and two or three evenings in most weeks in the year Bill and George would walk part of the way out from the City together, separating at different points on the route according to the nature of their varying destinations. On this particular afternoon, Bill, having finished his work for the day, went as he often did, and looked into his partner's room to ascertain his plans for going home. George had his hat on and bore every appearance of being about to leave, but seeing Bill, he suddenly took it off again.

"I've just remembered a letter I must write," he said. "I'm afraid I shall be some time."

"That's all right," answered Bill. "I'll wait."

He sat down in the visitors' chair, while George went through a protracted pantomime of a man hunting for writing-paper. A realistic and painstaking performance it was too, but it was marred by one thing.

"If you're looking for notepaper," said Bill, "you'll find some in the rack in front of you."

George started with surprise.

"Why, so it is," he said. "Thanks very much, old man. Of course."

He selected a piece with the utmost deliberation, and then began fiddling in one of his drawers. Presently he emerged with a box of nibs, a pen-knife and a broken pencil. From these unusual materials he appeared to contemplate manufacturing a pen. Bill watched his awkward efforts for some time, and then at last he said :

"May I make a suggestion ?"

"Eh ? What's that ? I'm sorry ; I thought you'd gone. Yes, certainly. What sort of a suggestion ?"

"Well," said Bill. "Why not use your fountain pen ?"

"My fountain pen ?" George repeated. "Oh, yes. Of course. I—er . . ." He began slapping his pockets.

"Waistcoat, George," said Bill. "Top left-hand side."

"Oh, yes,"

He pulled it from its sheath and gazed at it much as one might expect a savage to examine such a piece of possibly dangerous mechanism.

"George," said Bill, accusingly.

George gave another exaggerated start.

"Hullo; yes?" he answered.

"George, your acting might possibly deceive the one other person in the world who is as ridiculous as you are; that is, if it were possible to discover him. But do you really flatter yourself that it is deceiving me?"

"My acting?" repeated George, making a last attempt to brazen it out. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you what I mean," said Bill. "You are going through all these childish conjuring tricks with the firm's stationery, because you want to exhaust my patience and make me leave the office. But the ultimate intention at the back of your transparent old skull it is vain to attempt to conceal. Put away your toys, and we will go round there together."

"Go where?" said George uneasily.

"Where you were trying to go without me. To the City office of your friend Lemaitre."

George capitulated at once.

"Oh, all right," he said. "We might as well just have a look, don't you think? I mean, it couldn't do any harm just to drop in."

"Come along, you pitiful hypocrite," said Bill.

George grinned amiably.

"I'm sorry, Bill," he said; "but it is a bit funny not having heard from Paris. Don't you agree?"

"Very laughable," said Bill. "Come along."

The office towards which the partners were now setting out was not unknown to either of them, since they had both paid several visits there some years before, while engaged on the negotiations for Barrett's transfer. It consisted, as they remembered, of two or three rooms only in a big commercial rabbit-warren, in the neighbourhood of East Cheap. But beyond a general recollection that it had been somewhere upstairs, they found that neither of them could recall the number or the floor. However,

the obvious thing to do in such circumstances was to walk into the lift and say "Lemaître," and this they did.

The attendant had already slammed the gate and was dashing them aloft, when the sound of this name brought his machine to a sudden standstill.

"What's the matter?" asked George.

"Matter?" repeated the liftman, in a hoarse voice. "That's what *I* should like to know. Ho, yuss."

The partners looked at each other nervously, but as the attendant showed no signs of continuing his professional duties by wafting them either upwards or downwards, Bill asked him:

"Do you mean that the office is closed?"

"Closed?" said the liftman, who seemed to have a turn for these ironical echoes, and whose voice was certainly very hoarse. "Per'aps. Or per'aps not. 'Ere," he continued, restarting the lift with a jerk which nearly threw his passengers on the floor. "Come 'ere, and I'll show you."

He stopped for a second time, opened the gates, and led the way along a corridor.

"I remember now," murmured George. "It's right at the end. Round a corner somewhere."

Their guide had stopped.

"There," he said, pointing to a door to which a piece of paper had been fastened with a drawing-pin. "Read that!"

George and Bill drew nearer.

"Notice," they read in typewritten capitals. "This office will be closed for the remainder of this week. Please leave letters and parcels with the housekeeper. L. Thibaud, London Manager."

His own fears and the liftman's mysterious manner had worked on Bill's feelings to such an extent, that he had been prepared for something infinitely more alarming and disastrous than what he now actually saw. And it looked as though George must have been through something of the same sort, for he turned to the liftman and asked him rather shortly why he had brought them all this way for nothing.

"Ah," said the liftman, with an overwhelming air of wisdom. "I thought you might ask that, gentlemen. But what I said to myself was, 'Let the gentlemen see it for themselves, and then they'll believe me.'"

George and Bill exchanged glances, and the glances being interpreted signified their joint opinion that the relaxation of the licensing restrictions had not escaped the liftman's notice. But the liftman was resuming his discourse.

"Yuss," he said. "There's curious things been going on 'ere. First they sacks the boy, and then they sacks the clurk, and then they sacks the lady-typist; or anyway, if they didn't sack them, why 'asn't none of them been 'ere since Friday night? Per'aps you'll kindly tell me that?"

He paused for a moment, but since no alternative suggestion as to the fate of the staff was forthcoming, he went on once more.

"Then the manager comes in all by 'imself on Saturday, and all by 'imself on Monday, that's yesterday; and does 'e say a word to me or the 'ousekeeper downstairs about taking charge of 'is letters? No, gentlemen, 'e does not. All we finds to-day is this blooming picce of paper on this blinking door.

"If you was to ask mc," he concluded, sinking his voice still lower, "I should say it was a very funny circumstance."

He seemed so much pleased with this summing-up of the general situation, that he repeated, "a very funny circumstance indeed."

And then his voice ceased, but he remained breathing loudly and gazing alternately at the two partners.

"Well," said George politely, "you've told it all very nicely, I'm sure. And now suppose you take us downstairs again."

"If I'd said that," thought Bill, "he'd only have become abusive. I wish George could teach me how he gets that tone into his voice."

The tone certainly had its effect. For the liftman conducted them back to the ground floor without another

word, and only as he opened the grill of his craft did he mumble :

"No offence, guv'nors, I 'ope."

"Not at all," said George benevolently. "And perhaps you will do me the favour of accepting this shilling and buying yourself some throat lozenges."

The lift man stood gaping after them, and it seemed as though the next time he told his story, it would contain a number of interesting additions.

"Shall we try the housekeeper?" Bill suggested.

"No," said George. "We don't want to start any more gossip. Let's get out."

In the street, however, they both stopped.

"Well?" asked Bill.

"I don't understand it," said George. "I'm going to telegraph to Paris now, at once."

They moved on to the nearest Post Office.

"*Please telegraph immediately when we may expect you. Delay not understood,*" was the text of the message which was finally despatched.

"That ought to fetch something out of them," said George; "unless they've all bolted and the whole thing's gone smash."

Bill laughed nervously.

"Oh, it can't be as bad as all that," he said.

"Eh?" said George. "No, of course it can't."

"Well, there's nothing more that we can do to-night," Bill went on. "I think I shall be getting along. Are you walking?"

"No," said George. "I left my bag at the office. I must take it back in a taxi. See you in the morning."

"Right you are."

And they separated.

5

We may imagine another wakeful night up under the mansard roof of Regency House; a night in which a pattern of figures wove itself in and out of a background of dance music, and in which a phantom George, a phantom Osman Girling and sometimes, but only too

seldom, a phantom Leslie pursued each other through snatches of uncomfortable dreams. If Bill had looked cheap on the Tuesday morning, he looked as though he ought to be given away on the Wednesday.

At half-past nine he was back at Pardon Court, where George arrived less than five minutes later. George wasn't looking particularly expensive this morning either.

Though there was very little hope of getting an answer to their telegram as early as this, they had both hoped to find a letter. But there was nothing.

"The infernal thing is," said George, "that Stromberg's been gone nearly a week now, and yet I daren't leave London again until this other business is cleared up."

Bill muttered something about its never raining without its also pouring.

"Yes," said George, "and misfortunes never come singly, I suppose you mean."

"No, I don't," answered Bill irritably. "But there's another one about a watched pot never boiling. I'm going to try and do some work."

"I suppose you mean by that——" George was beginning in a no less irritable tone of voice, when there was a knock at the door, and the boy came in with a letter.

"What's that?" Bill snapped.

"For Mr. Lucas, sir," said the boy.

George snatched it from him.

"Thank the Lord," he said. "Lemaître at last." And he tore it open.

Some remnants of discretion made Bill wait until the boy had slammed himself out, and then he asked:

"What does he say?"

George was staring in a dazed manner at a piece of paper which he held in his hand.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Bill impatiently.

George looked at him blankly.

"I'm jiggered," he announced, and let the paper and its envelope drop from his hand.

"But what—— Here, give it me."

Bill stooped to pick the paper from the chair on to which it had fallen.

"Jiggered," said George faintly.

A glance had been enough for Bill.

"But—but what does it mean?" he asked.

"And damned," added George.

"Is this all there was? Wasn't there a letter?"

George shook his head.

"Nothing else," he said.

"Then what—how—I mean . . . ?"

Bill's interrogatory noises died away into silence. How was one to begin asking questions about anything as inexplicable as this? For what he held in his hand was a promissory note, signed by his partner, undertaking to pay M. Gustave Lemaître the sum of approximately a million francs within one month from the date of signature. And across the face was written, "*Pour acquit. G. Lemaitre*," which in the vulgar tongue is as much as to say, "Paid in Full."

And this was the office in which he had told himself less than six weeks ago that nothing ever happened.

He pulled himself together with a great effort.

"But," he said, slowly and carefully, "you haven't paid him, have you?"

"No, of course I haven't," answered George feebly.

"How the devil could I?"

"Well, who has, then?"

George shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me another," he said.

"But look here, George, according to your agreement, isn't it the case that the payment of this balance would transfer the business to us at once?"

"Yes," said George. "That's right."

"There was no fixed date, was there?"

"No. We had a month to complete the payment, and of course there was no point in completing it any sooner. They weren't expecting it. They couldn't just walk away and leave us to carry on. I mean, the thing had got to be handed over in the proper way."

"That's what I thought," said Bill.

He left it at that, for there was no need to dot any i's or cross any t's. With this promissory note in their possession, the Agence Lemaître was theirs, lock, stock and barrel; offices, goodwill, assets and liabilities. Yes; and liabilities.

"There's only one thing to do," said George at last. "I must go back to Paris to-night."

"Yes," said Bill. "And this time I'm coming with you."

"Unless it's a joke," suggested George.

"A dashed funny kind of joke," said Bill. Colloquial English inevitably lands one in this kind of statement, but there was no real doubt about his meaning, and he could see that George agreed with him.

"I'll send the boy round to the passport office at once," he added. "I suppose they'll renew my old one?"

"Oh, yes. That'll be all right."

Bill put out his hand to press the bell-push, but before he could do so, there was a second knock at the door, and the boy had re-appeared.

"Mr. Barrett is here, sir," he said, "and he would like to see you as soon as possible, please."

"Barrett?" shouted George and Bill as one man. "Send him in at once."

They looked at each other in fear and expectation.

"Yes," said George. "Now we're in for it."

It was a Sidney MacGregor Barrett differing very much from his ordinary self who made his entrance the next moment. Night crossings do not, of course, as a general rule tend to serve travellers up looking quite their best. A certain pallor, often accompanied by a bristly chin and a disordered toilet, is only to be expected of those who have just passed through such an experience. But Barrett's appearance was positively ghastly. And as he crossed the threshold, it really looked for a moment as though he might collapse at his former employers' feet, like the poetical French youth at the siege of Ratisbon.

"Here, hold up, man," said George, coming forward quickly. "Stick him in a chair, Bill, while I get the office whisky."

But the apparition managed to reach a chair without assistance. In another second George had come plunging back with a bottle and a glass.

"Take a swig at this, old chap," he said, pouring out half a tumbler of neat spirits.

The ex-office-boy obeyed. At least perhaps he hardly took enough to be described as a swig, for he set the glass down again almost at once.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't have very much breakfast, I——" His eye suddenly fell on the document whose discussion his arrival had interrupted. "Ah, I see you've got it," he added.

"That's all right. Take your time," said George, in the voice in which policemen address fallen cart-horses.

"I'm quite right again, sir. Really I am."

"Are you certain?" asked George doubtfully.

"Yes, sir. I'm very sorry, I'm sure, but really . . ."

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Mr. Lemaître's bolted," he suddenly added.

"What?" exclaimed Bill.

"Yes, sir. I don't know what you'll think of me; I'm sure I don't. But of course I'd no idea. I don't like to think what I've let you in for."

"But where's he gone? When did this happen?" asked George and Bill together.

"Yesterday, sir. I'm afraid he'd been planning it all the time. To think of the way we've all been took in. My word, if I could only—but it's no good talking. He bolted yesterday, with Madame Kessler."

"What, the manager's wife?" asked George.

"Yes, sir. He and Mr. Kessler had an awful bust-up in the office. And he shot him."

"Who shot which?" said Bill. "I don't follow you."

"Mr. Lemaître shot Mr. Kessler, sir."

"But is he dead?"

"No, sir. But he's pretty bad, I'm afraid."

"But what about Madame Lemaître?" asked George. "Has anybody shot her?"

"No, sir," said Barrett. "But all that talk of taking her abroad was just dust in our eyes. He was planning the whole thing so as to get away with the other lady, sir. He'd have done it comfortably on the money, what's more. But Mr. Kessler, he found something out, and so the whole thing blew up."

"But he'll never get away," said George.

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir. But if he gets over the frontier, I expect that's the last we shall hear of him."

"But this note of mine," George went on. "How does that come into it?"

"He must have done that when he saw he'd got to bolt," said Barrett. "Anyhow, he told Mr. Kessler that he'd done it while they were having their row, and Mr. Kessler, he told me when I saw him in the hospital. It was he who said I'd better come over and see you at once, but of course I should have done that anyhow."

"But why didn't you come before?" asked Bill. "We were expecting you and Kessler on Monday."

"I know, sir. But it was the old man—beg pardon, Mr. Lemaître, who stopped us coming. He told Mr. Kessler some cock and bull story and made him write putting you off."

"I wonder why," said Bill. "I should have thought he'd have been glad to have you out of the way."

"He had a very good reason, sir," said Barrett. "He was holding up a big draft that should have gone to the London office. Mr. Thibaud, that's the London manager, he couldn't make out what was wrong, so he closed the office and came over to find out. I saw him last night, just before I started."

"Oh," said George. "So Lemaître has gone off with that money as well, has he?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"And I suppose this affair is all over Paris by now?"

"About the shooting, sir?"

"About the whole business."

"Well, sir, I expect the French newspapers are pretty full of the police side of the thing. You know, sir, there's nothing they like so much as this kind of story, and there wasn't much chance of keeping it dark. But as for the business side, I don't suppose the trouble will start—at least not properly—for a day or two. It rather depends on you and Mr. Fraser, sir, and what you decide to do."

Bill took up the examination.

"Did Lemaître go off with anything except Mr. Lucas's cheque and that draft for the London branch?" he asked.

"Not that I could trace, sir."

"And the draft was?"

"Two hundred and twenty-five thousand francs, sir."

"And who's in charge at the Rue d'Uzès now?"

"Mr. Thibaud, sir. He'll keep in touch with Mr. Kessler as much as the doctors let him, but I shall be going back to-night. The police wanted to hold me for the enquiry, and I'm only here on parole, in a manner of speaking."

"I see," said Bill.

He looked at George, and George looked at him. They were clearly agreed on the most immediate steps to be taken.

"Well, Barrett," he went on, "it's like what I know of you to come over here and try to help us yourself, and we're pretty much obliged, as you can guess. Now, if I were you, I'd go out and get a shave and a good meal, and then if you'll come back here, we'll go into the whole thing as well as we can. Are you all right for money?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, sir. Is there anything I can do for you while I'm out?"

"No, thanks," said George. "Except keep your mouth shut."

"*Les oreilles ennemies vous écoutent?*" suggested the surprising Barrett.

"I hope not," said George. "But you've got the right idea. We'll see you later, then."

And Barrett took up his hat, and withdrew.

"And now perhaps you'll tell me," said Bill, "whether this business, or what's left of it, is ours or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if I tore up this I.O.U. of yours, and swore it had never reached us. What then?"

"Don't do that," said George hastily.

"All right. I'm not going to do it really. I'm only asking you how we should stand, if I did."

George settled his spectacles.

"Of course, I'm not a lawyer——" he began.

"Thanks," said Bill. "That will do. In other words, you mean that you've no more idea than I have."

"Well, it isn't torn up," George protested, "and it has reached us. Can't we talk about things as they are?"

"I'd love to," said Bill. "Especially if you'll tell me what you mean by 'as they are.'"

"Well," said George slowly. "We can't sue old Lemaître for misrepresentation or whatever it's called; because in the first place we don't know where he is, and in the second place I don't believe there was any. If his plans had gone through all right, he'd have got twelve hundred thousand francs, and we'd have got a jolly fine business; and then, as far as we were concerned, he could have run away with all the women in France."

"I quite agree," said Bill. "But his plans didn't go through all right."

"No," said George. "I wish they had."

"Well, I'm glad you're not in charge of public morals; that's all I can say. Now perhaps you'll tell me something else. This money that he's kept back from the London branch, has he stolen it from us or stolen it from himself?"

George frowned at his boots.

"I wouldn't like to say," he announced at length. "Strictly speaking, I should imagine that he has stolen it from his English creditors. But there's one thing I

can't help thinking, and that is that we shall have to make it good."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Bill.

There was a pause, while they both took in the attractions of this new idea.

"Well," resumed Bill at last, "it seems to me that we've got two courses open to us. We can either sit tight here, let Lemaître's business go smash and wait to be sued by everyone in the world who thinks they've got a claim against it; or we can go back to Paris with Barrett to-night and see if by any chance we can pull any of the fat out of the fire before it's all frizzled to bits."

"That's so," said George.

"And in either case, I should say that we stood a most extraordinarily jolly good chance of going bankrupt in two countries at once."

"That is also so," said George.

"But on the whole, I think the second alternative is a bit more sporting than the first."

"Yes," said George. "And I'll tell you something else. We were to have bought this agency for twelve hundred thousand francs, while, as things are, we've got it for less than a third. Now I call that cheap."

"But my dear old George, what do you suppose the goodwill of a business is worth where the proprietor has just shot the manager, and run away with his wife, and taken between four and five thousand pounds out of the till?"

"Oh, they don't think much of that sort of thing on the continent," said George airily. "And as for the five thousand pounds, I'm allowing for that in the purchase price."

Bill realised that his elastic partner had already touched the ground and was now bounding up again.

"Of course," he said, "I suppose any ordinary kind of people would go and see their solicitors at this stage."

George looked a little uncomfortable.

"Yes, but you know all that would happen if we did that," he said.

“What?”

“They’d waste the first five hours in telling us what fools we’d made of ourselves, and then they’d say they must have a fortnight in which to make up their minds.”

“Well, we can’t wait a fortnight.”

“We can’t wait twenty-four hours,” said George. “You can go and see the lawyers if you like, but I’m going to Paris to-night.”

“And,” said Bill, very firmly, “you’re not going alone this time.”

George’s grin made its first re-appearance since his return from Leicester.

“Another palpable hit,” he said.

“But,” Bill went on, “there’s one other thing that’s got to be done first.”

George nodded.

“You mean Girling?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“He’s got us in a corner all right now, hasn’t he?”

“Then you agree that we must do what he wants?”

“I don’t like it,” said George, “and I’m absolutely dashed if I can understand it, but we can’t let Stromberg’s order hang over for ever.”

“That’s just it. And we can’t be the first people who haven’t been able to see through Osman Girling. If he likes to pay us a commission to let him finance us, I don’t see that we can afford to stop him.”

“He gave you until four this afternoon, didn’t he?” asked George.

“Yes. I’d better ring up for an appointment at once.”

“I wonder——” George began; and then he stopped.

“Yes,” said Bill. “I’ve wondered that too. But remember, I saw him on Monday afternoon, and this affair in Paris only happened some time yesterday. Besides, even if he saw it all in a crystal, what’s the connection? What’s the point?”

George groaned.

“Go on,” he said. “Ring the old blighter up.”

At half-past three, therefore, in accordance with the bald-headed secretary's instructions, the partners presented themselves at Imperial Buildings. Once again there was a period of waiting in the corridor, followed by a period of waiting in the antechamber. Once again the bald-headed secretary battled with a tornado of correspondence amidst a hail of telephone calls. And then, at last, though not until nearly five minutes to four, the buzzer sounded and he rose to open the inner door.

There was no convincing evidence that Mr. Girling, whose resemblance to the frog-footman seemed more marked than ever, had moved so much as a muscle during the forty-eight hours since we last saw him. Somebody, however, must have refilled the kettle and the spirit lamp, for the one was still steaming and the other still burning, and again the air was weighed down with visible roses and invisible cigars. On this occasion, though, there was no sign of Sir Donald Hammersmith, for Mr. Girling was alone.

"May I introduce my partner, Mr. Lucas?" said Bill, as his host showed no signs of removing his eyes from the alabaster bowl in the centre of the ceiling.

"Pleased to meet you," said Mr. Girling, bowing slightly from the sofa. "Will you have some tea?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Girling," answered George, and the customary heartiness of his tones seemed to make the frog-footman wince slightly. At any rate, at this point he fetched his eyes down from the ceiling.

"Take a seat, gentlemen," he said.

The partners obeyed.

"Hrrrr-um-ha," said Mr. Girling, with great deliberation. "I imagine that this visit is connected with the proposal which I put before Mr. Fraser on Monday, eh?"

George and Bill bowed.

"You're just in time," said Mr. Girling, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "That is, if, as I imagine, you have decided to change your minds. Or am I mistaken?"

Bill opened his mouth to speak, but George got in first.

"I've been in business a good many years, Mr. Girling," he said, "and I must say that your proposal strikes me as a very unusual one; but, circumstances being what they are, we are ready to fall in with it. I am afraid, however, that our acceptance must be subject to Messrs. Miller being able to give us at least six months' credit from the date of the delivery of the goods. And I should also like to hear what commission you are proposing to pay us for agreeing to this arrangement, and how and when it will be paid."

Mr. Girling picked up his tea-cup and took a delicate sip.

"This is rather a change from your partner's attitude the day before yesterday, Mr. Lucas," he said. "Would it be too much to ask to what it is due?"

Bill waited to hear in what way George would refer to Ledburys' extraordinary behaviour, but his answer took an unexpected form.

"I agree it's a bit of a change," he said; "but a good deal has happened since Monday. My partner and I have got to go off to Paris at once, to look into a business that we've bought there, and I don't know how long we shall have to be away. I'll be perfectly open with you, Mr. Girling,—more so, perhaps, than you have been with us. We've landed ourselves in a bit of a mess with this purchase. Now my partner has told me that you want us to give this order to Millers' in the ordinary way, and that your name isn't to come into it at all. That is so, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Girling. "That is absolutely essential."

"Well," continued George, "our friends in Helsingfors are perfectly safe. There's no fear that they won't pay up, for we've known them for fifteen or twenty years. But if things go wrong over this French business, and at this stage I wouldn't like to say what mightn't happen, there's a possibility that we, as a firm, may not be in existence in six months from now. You see, Mr.

Girling, if you start dealing with small businesses like ours, you've got to remember that it doesn't take very much in these days to knock them right out. If that happens to us, and we have to go through an examination, I couldn't undertake to keep your name out of it, for otherwise what answer could I give when the receiver asks me, 'Why did you go to this firm of manufacturers whom you didn't know, and place such a large order with them, when you knew the state of your affairs? Why didn't you follow your general practice and split the order among your usual people?'"

What on earth was old George up to now? This talk of bankruptcy was enough to make anyone shiver. Didn't he realise that they wanted Mr. Girling to help them; not to frighten him off with this horrible dramatisation of a dialogue with the Official Receiver?

These were Bill's thoughts, but, to be perfectly fair, Mr. Girling showed no sign of being frightened. As George floundered along in his loud and argumentative voice, glaring at him through his spectacles, all he did was to take from his pocket the familiar gold pencil-case and begin swinging it dreamily by the ring. And even when George at last stopped, all he said was:

"But Mr. Fraser said nothing of all this on Monday."

"But the position was quite different then," Bill protested. "We've only just learnt this morning that there's trouble in Paris. When I saw you, I knew nothing about it."

Mr. Girling seemed to let this sink in.

"This business . . . in Paris . . . that is in trouble," he murmured presently. "May one ask if it is also connected with the same industry?"

Bill looked to his partner for guidance, but George was already answering.

"It was a private firm of importers," he said. "Yes, they dealt in hosiery."

"British hosiery?" asked Mr. Girling.

"Yes; practically entirely."

"Any other goods?"

"No. Nothing else."

Again Mr. Girling sipped his tea, and stared at the lamp in the ceiling, and presently he remarked :

"What is said in this room never goes outside. I think I am entitled to ask a few questions."

And, whether entitled or not, this was what he did ; that is, if we accept the word "few" in the sense which Mr. Girling apparently attached to it. For as a matter of fact, even George's hypothetical receiver must have taken a back seat, if Mr. Girling had been anywhere about. Throughout the next half-hour he examined and cross-examined the two partners on every detail of their knowledge of the Agence Lemaître, on the manner in which it had come into their possession, and on the steps which they were proposing to take in connection with it. No professional lawyer could have got at the facts in less time or with greater economy of words. And not a second did he waste in surprise or criticism either for George's original precipitancy or for M. Lemaître's financial and personal morals. Whatever he was told, he accepted, checked it off, and passed on to the next question. Time and again Bill asked himself why he and George were letting themselves be pumped in this way ; but the answer was obvious. They couldn't help it. And whether they were enjoying it or not, it was impossible not to be fascinated by the quickness and precision with which this extraordinary man's brain worked.

"Well, gentlemen," said Mr. Girling, when he had extracted the last drop of information from his defenceless visitors, "I must thank you for your frankness. What you have told me naturally affects my plans to a considerable extent. However, I am always as good as my word. Just as good and no better. That's my secret." He surprised them with a strange sound which might have been intended for a chuckle. "I've made you an offer," he went on, "and I don't withdraw it. But I would be obliged if you would wait here a few minutes, while I have a word with my secretary."

"But can't we wait outside while you have him in ?" suggested Bill.

"No," said Mr. Girling, rising from the sofa with unexpected agility. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute." And he moved quickly out of the door, closing it again behind him.

"Well," said Bill, "there isn't much that he doesn't know about us now. But I say, what on earth made you spring all that stuff about us going bankrupt? I mean to say, what's that got to do with him?"

"I don't know," said George. "But people have got no right to sit there drinking tea at one and looking like Chinese idols. Perhaps I wanted to make him sit up. But what does it matter, anyhow? If I hadn't told him, he'd have found out if he'd wanted to."

"I suppose he would," said Bill.

"And what's more, I have an unaccountable feeling that when he said that nothing would go outside this room, he meant it. Of course, I may be wrong . . ."

"Well, what does he want to talk to his secretary about?"

"What does he want to do anything for?" asked George, and they both relapsed into silence.

"I can't stand this," he suddenly broke out again a little later. "Doesn't he realise that we've got a train to catch? I can't kick my heels all night in this blooming cross between a Pullman-car and a stage bedroom. How much longer does he mean to keep us here?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders. Speculation on anything connected with Mr. Girling seemed so useless. He sank back in his big arm-chair, while George continued to pace the room like a caged lion. Every third or fourth time that he turned, he uttered an ejaculation of impatience, and after every third or fourth ejaculation, he would make as if he were going to open the door, only to abandon his intention on the very threshold and resume his march across the carpet.

As for Bill, he was certainly no less anxious to get finished with the interview, for there was still much to be done before leaving London. But the combination of his fatigue from the night before and the heavy, drugged atmosphere of the room, had the effect of mak-

ing him a temporary fatalist. If Mr. Girling had gone away and forgotten all about them, or had locked the door and was preparing to set fire to Imperial Buildings, nothing, he felt, that he could do could make any difference. Of only one thing was it possible to be reasonably certain, and that was that whatever happened next would be something that he didn't expect.

And then at last, when the clock was on the point of registering half an hour of their imprisonment, the door opened again and Mr. Girling re-appeared. He sped past them both and resumed his place on the sofa, rather as though he were trying to create the illusion that he had never really left the room; while George pulled himself up in his tracks, and Bill levered himself off his shoulder-blades into a position which is more generally associated with arm-chairs.

Yet even now they were kept waiting for another minute while a young woman came in with a fresh kettle and placed it carefully on the little tray by the sofa.

"Thank you," said Mr. Girling, dismissing her; and then, turning to his visitors, he added: "You're sure you won't join me in a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you," said George and Bill together.

Mr. Girling slowly poured himself out another cup and raised it to his lips.

"Ah," he sighed, and put it back on the tray.

"Now, then, gentlemen," he continued, "I must apologise for keeping you waiting so long, but I have an alternative suggestion to put before you, and I should like you to consider it very carefully. I don't withdraw my first proposal; I never withdraw anything; but I think this is a plan which may suit both of us a good deal better."

He remained for a moment lost in thought, and then resumed.

"I will pay off the loan which you have incurred with your bankers. I will also place two hundred and fifty thousand francs to your credit with my own bank in Paris. If it should be necessary, I will supply you with any further funds which you may require for carrying

on this agency until I am satisfied that it is well on its feet, at a nominal rate of interest—let us say two and a half per cent. In return for these services I shall nominate a gentleman who will draw a third share of any profits arising from this French business, and who will remain with you in Paris as my representative as long as I think fit. We won't call him a partner, because I won't have him tied by any articles of association, but I think his advice may be of assistance to you. If you accept, this gentleman will leave with you for Paris to-night. Also, if you accept, I will undertake that Messrs. Ledbury will raise no further difficulties about accepting your Finnish order. I have only one condition to make, and that is that whatever you decide to do, my name is on no account to be mentioned by either of you as having any connection with this business. I hope I have made myself clear."

He stopped, and for a moment there was silence. Then he took out his watch.

"This alternative offer will remain open for ten minutes," he added. "I shall be glad to answer any questions, if you have any to put."

George and Bill turned and looked at each other in helpless amazement, and each saw the same thought reflected in the other's expression. Mr. Girling's riches had clearly driven him mad. What other conceivable explanation could there be for this complicated and yet pointless suggestion? What could he be driving at? What advantage could he hope to get out of it all?

It was George who found his voice first.

"May I ask the name of this other man?" he said.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Girling courteously. "I beg your pardon. I should of course have explained that. My nominee will be Mr. Pilbrow, whom I think you have both already met. He is at present acting as my private secretary."

So far as Bill was concerned, the only effect of this statement was to make his mental fog come on thicker than ever. And yet he had an irritating kind of feeling that if only he could get hold of things the right way

round, this piece of information should have caused some sort of light to shine on the mystery. Meanwhile time was quickly passing.

"May I and my partner have a couple of minutes in which to talk this over?" he suggested.

"Certainly," said Mr. Girling, more suavely than ever. "I will leave you." And once again he got up from the sofa and floated out of the room.

George sank into another of the big arm-chairs.

"This beats me," he said.

"Well," said Bill, "there's only one thing that I can see. If this Mr. What's-his-name comes in on a third share, I suppose he's there to play Osman Girling's game and not ours."

"I suppose so," said George. "But what *is* the game? Don't tell me that Girling has ever made his money by playing fairy godmother to people in our sort of position, or that he means to begin now. Because I won't believe it."

And indeed Bill could not but agree that one would far more readily associate him with the part of the Demon King.

"Perhaps he wants to do his secretary a good turn," he suggested.

"What, by getting him a share in a business that may go bust any minute? That's a funny sort of good turn."

"Well, perhaps he wants to do us a good turn?"

"Then why fetch in the secretary? No, my dear old Bill, it's no good looking for reasons, because we shan't find them. All we've got to decide is whether we are going to sell a third share in Lemaître's business for ten thousand pounds and Osman Girling's backing, or whether we're going to try and carry on by ourselves with him against us."

"If you put it like that," said Bill, "I don't see that we've got much choice."

"Well, have we? I ask you; have we?"

"If you and I stick together," added Bill, "and Girling daren't let his name come into it—though why

not, heaven only knows—then I don't see how this other fellow can do us much harm. After all, we shall be two to one. But did you ever hear anything so insane as asking us to make up our minds in ten minutes?"

"No," said George. "But I'm afraid he means it."

"Well, look here, then," said Bill. "Let's try him with this. Let's say we'll agree, if we can have the option at the end of a year, or whatever period you like to say, of buying the secretary out again for ten thousand pounds plus an agreed percentage."

"But what's the point of that?"

"No particular point, except that I don't know the fellow, and I don't want him. Of course it's more than likely we shouldn't have the money, even if he agrees, but—well, dash it all, I don't see why he should make all the conditions."

"All right," said George. "We'll try him with that. I expect we'll be sorry, whatever we do."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Bill. And at these words the door opened again and Mr. Girling returned.

"Well, gentlemen?" he asked.

"We accept your offer, Mr. Girling," said George, "if you will agree to this one condition." And he repeated Bill's suggestion.

Mr. Girling shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said, carelessly. "We'll say one year, and fifteen per cent. on whatever sum I have to pay out. Does that suit you?"

George looked at Bill.

"Yes," said Bill.

"Mr. Pilbrow will meet you at Victoria at a quarter to eight, then," Mr. Girling went on. "He will hand you a memorandum setting out the particulars of our arrangement. My name won't appear in it, as he will be acting for me from now onwards; but you need have no fear that I will not keep to my part of the agreement."

He glanced at the ceiling again for a moment, and then added:

"And Ledburys' will give you any reasonable credit now that you want. I am much obliged to you, gentle-

men. Don't forget, my name drops out of this for good from this moment. If I find that you've used it, I'll smash you both."

Nothing could be gentler, or more alarming, than the way in which he uttered this threat.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he concluded, and turning his back, he crossed the room and sat down at his little writing-table.

Somehow or other George and Bill found their way through the secretary's empty room out into the street.

"Well," asked George, "what do you make of that?"

Bill didn't answer him. He was thinking of Leslie's admiration the night before, when he had boasted to her of the things that he was going to do with his silly little business, and he had a very unpleasant feeling that he had secured that admiration under false pretences. For what was the use of deceiving oneself? From the moment that George and he had accepted Mr. Girling's offer, they had—and he suddenly knew it—become pawns in one of his big games. What good was it to speak of "lashing out," as he had done to Leslie last night? Why, Girling had even put his private secretary in to see that they behaved.

Yet what else could they have done?

He turned to George impatiently.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," he said, "let's talk of something else."

"I'm sorry, Bill," answered George. "I know how you feel. But I'm not forgetting whose fault this has been. Don't think that."

"George," said Bill, "I'm a brute. Let's—let's have a drink."

"You? A drink?"

"Yes. And if you ask me what, then I say any dashed stuff in the world except tea."

George's grin flickered and vanished.

"I rather agree with you," he answered.

Probably neither of the partners would have felt any great surprise if the bald-headed secretary had failed to put in an appearance on the continental boat train, for once away from the exotic atmosphere of Mr. Girling's lair, it became almost impossible to believe in the reality of that extraordinary interview. However, whether he turned up or not, their immediate plans must remain unchanged ; and as a matter of fact, when they reached Victoria, accompanied by a shaved and considerably soothed Barrett, almost the first person they saw was Mr. Pilbrow, standing by the bookstall, and examining the magazine covers. With a hat on his head he looked unexpectedly young, and when Bill touched him on the arm, he turned and smiled in a way that was almost human. Perhaps, after all, it would be possible to shake down with this unknown quantity.

Bill introduced Barrett and explained that he was also crossing.

"Good," said Pilbrow. "I've just told the conductor a lie and reserved four seats in the end section of the Pullman, so this will make it true."

Bill had been hoping to get alone somewhere with George, but if the seats really had been reserved, and as the bald-headed secretary was so clearly trying to make himself agreeable, he merely thanked him, and they all moved together to the barrier.

But once in the train, Mr. Pilbrow made no further attempts at conversation.

"This is for you," he said, handing George a large envelope, and immediately he became absorbed in the magazines which he had bought. As for Barrett, he was an ideal travelling companion, for he fell asleep the second the train started, and never woke up except at Folkestone and Boulogne, where he displayed an astonishing bilingual efficiency, which resulted in their getting on and off the boat before anyone else.

George and Bill examined Mr. Girling's memorandum in turn. Whether it would have possessed any value in a Court of Law, it was impossible to say ; it was

certainly a great deal shorter and clearer than any ordinary legal document ; but it agreed with his verbal proposals in every respect. And Pilbrow's shining cranium, swaying gently with the motion of the train, seemed suddenly to take on a very reassuring appearance.

"After all," Bill whispered to George, "we've got a hostage with us."

But most of the journey he was thinking of something quite apart from his commercial troubles ; of something that he had learnt when he had rung up Maurice's house just before leaving the flat, to tell him that he was going abroad on business, and must cancel the arrangements for his next dinner.

"How long will you be away ?" Maurice had asked.

"I don't quite know," Bill had answered. "Some little time, probably. But I'll write to you."

"Oh, by the way, Bill. Look here. What did you mean by telling me that the White House was in the market ?"

"Well, I was told it was. Isn't it ?"

"No, it isn't."

"Why, how did you find out ?"

"Well, after you told me about it the other day, I wrote to Lord Longwood. I shouldn't have thought it was necessary to remind him who I was, especially as he'd just been seeing you. But still, so that there shouldn't be any mistake, I did remind him."

"Well ?"

"I asked him whether he wanted to let or sell, and if he'd let me know the price."

"Yes ?"

"Well, I didn't hear anything for four or five days, and I was just going to write again, when I got a letter from some fellow called Harvey. His secretary or his agent, I suppose."

"Yes," said Bill. "That's his secretary. What did he say ?"

"He wrote a damned stiff sort of letter saying that he regretted that the property was not for disposal.

It made me pretty sick, especially after what you said about the old man being so particular who got it. Doesn't he think I'm good enough?"

"Oh, of course not. Somebody else must have taken it."

"Well, but who? There was no talk of it ten days ago, was there?"

"No," said Bill. "But that's what must have happened."

"I suppose it must. But it's a bit odd, all the same; and infernally annoying. Well, good luck to you."

"Thanks awfully. Give my love to your family. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Yes, it was puzzling. In fact it was so puzzling, that even when they had reached the Gare du Nord the next morning, Bill still didn't know whether he were pleased or disappointed.

V

FOUR MONTHS ELAPSE

1

THERE is a little *café* on the *rive gauche* where my friend *Père Bossu* often pauses for his *apéritif*——

I beg your pardon. I didn't really mean to write that. But you have no idea how difficult it is for an author to begin a chapter on Paris except in this way. Literary traditions are so strong, and human nature is so weak, that the words had escaped from my pen before I had a chance to stop them. Of course the little *café* had nothing whatever to do with the story. Nor had *Père Bossu*; nor his *apéritif*. They were simply an author's idea of introducing local colour. My desk—it is a table really, but all authors refer to them as desks—is simply crammed with rejected short stories which begin like this, and for the moment the temptation to use up some of this waste material must have overcome me. I apologise. I will try to start again.

But it is a little difficult, you know. Even if one cuts out the italics—and I have plenty more words just as good as the ones above—there is another great handicap to be dealt with. It is the first rule of all Literary Correspondence Schools that one must never write about France without previously working oneself up into a state of romantic hysteria about the country and its customs. How exactly this is to be done is never fully explained. But it is understood that a strong dose of brandy and garlic is of considerable assistance. The brandy shifts one's perspective and the garlic makes one cry, and in this condition one lets oneself go, and the rest follows. What the French themselves think of the result is not known; but the English come running

for it, and as for the Americans—well, honour among thieves, you know. I mustn't begin getting personal about other authors.

But this is the trouble. Are we to sacrifice truth and represent Bill Fraser as living in a round of fancy-dress balls and curiously-coloured drinks (with perhaps a little subplot about a consumptive *grisette*), which is what the public expect; or are we to sacrifice Bill himself and all his claims to popularity, by admitting that although he passed no less than four months of his life in Paris, he spent them practically entirely in an office and a bed-sitting-room, and was, moreover, acutely miserable almost the whole time?

Perhaps we could meet the difficulty in this way. Couldn't we take all the gush about France as read? Couldn't we admit right at the beginning that there is no country in the world exactly like that which the French nation happens to occupy, and that among its inhabitants are to be found (as in the case of other lands) supreme exemplifications of every manner of virtue; and having done this, couldn't we leave it to other people to wallow in italicised sentiment, while we get on with the plain facts? I'm afraid I haven't put it very tactfully, but you get the idea, don't you? There can be no question that this arrangement would save a tremendous amount of space; far more than has been taken up in this little interruption; and anyone who still feels that he really must have the local colour at the same time has only got to have the prescription which is mentioned above made up in his own kitchen, and sip it at intervals while reading the story. The result can almost be guaranteed.

Now, then. Those in favour of this proposal, kindly signify the same in the usual manner.

Those against?

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. We'll go right ahead at once.

And now that everything is clear again, it may perhaps be pointed out that it was entirely Bill's own fault

that he stayed on in Paris, while George, as soon as the pressure of the general crisis permitted, returned to London. For if there were any particular reason why one partner rather than the other should remain at the office in the Rue d'Uzès, one might have expected the matter to be settled by the fact that Bill was the tenant of a London flat, while George still preferred to live in rooms from which he could at any time remove himself by giving a week's notice. But the more obvious solution was complicated by the formulation in Bill's mind of the first of his Rules for a young man who finds that he has fallen in love with a rich young woman. And this first Rule was that one might go on being in love as much as one liked, provided that one kept away from the object of one's affections.

Set down like this, it certainly seems rather a silly rule, and in these days there can be very few people who would think of following it. For one thing, although originally invented in a spirit of renunciation and unselfishness, it is obvious that it entirely disregarded Leslie's feelings and preferences in the matter. But there it was, and perhaps we might wait for further examples of the code before we condemn it too impatiently.

In any case, if one wanted to keep away from her, and to do it in a manner which would be neither rude nor suspicious, here was certainly a golden opportunity. So in the intervals of all the thousand and one things which had to be done, Bill returned again and again to his unexplained desire to be the one to stay in Paris, and the good-natured George, reluctant and uncomfortable as he felt about it, in the end agreed. He even consented to become Bill's temporary tenant at Regency House, thereby losing, probably for ever, his own well-tried lodgings. But whatever explanation he may have imagined for the obstinacy of his partner's choice, he kept his thoughts to himself. Which, it will probably be agreed, was a great deal more than the partner deserved.

George also took back with him M. Thibaud, who was

accommodated in Bill's room at Pardon Court—thus saving the rent of his former quarters in the East Cheap rabbit-warren—while Mr. Pilbrow remained for the time being in Paris, where Barrett was promoted to the rank of manager.

For the unfortunate M. Kessler survived two operations only to succumb to heart-failure just as the surgeons were expecting him to come round after the third ; the third, which they had told him with unconscious honesty was to be the last. Bill went to his funeral, at which he was offered, and, out of respect for the relatives' feelings, accepted, more strange cordials than he might afterwards have cared to describe. Indeed, his memory of the whole overwhelming ritual became blurred and misty, and there is no use concealing the fact that he was very ill for the next twenty-four hours ; but this was attributed by Pilbrow, who also went, drank and suffered, to the length of time that everybody was kept standing in the rain, and there is no doubt that this must have helped.

Thus departed the victim of the *affaire Lemaître*, and of the guilty survivors nothing further has ever been heard. Whether the disgusting old gentleman succeeded in retaining the affections of Mme. Kessler throughout the years of their exile must remain, therefore, unknown. It seems probable, though, that he did ; for a companion who has it in her power to send you to the guillotine is without question one with whom it will pay to keep on good terms.

Abandoning further speculation on this point, there remains Mme. Lemaître, the invalid about whom it may be remembered that George Lucas once said that there was no fake. And here we come on a curious fact which should be of special interest to the medical profession. For George was quite right ; there had been no fake. Mme. Lemaître had been ill for years and had become progressively iller. Her own doctors' evidence on this point can scarcely be disputed. Why, then, should this domestic tragedy, which might reasonably have been expected to bring down her grey hairs in sorrow

to the grave, have had the surprising effect of restoring her almost immediately to robust, not to say offensive health? Various ideas will suggest themselves to account for this phenomenon. It is possible that her husband had been systematically poisoning her for years, or that the doctors had been doing the same thing, and now mistrusted her continued ability to pay them for it. It is conceivable that the nervous shock did really shake her up to such an extent that the cause of her illness, whatever it was, was removed. But there are certainly attractions about the theory put forward by George on one of his later visits. George pointed out that once a Frenchwoman becomes a widow—and this, according to him, was just as much the case before the war as it is to-day—she is practically immortal. It is hardly necessary to have recourse to statistics to support this view, for the truth of it will be immediately apparent to any one who has ever travelled in France. Mme. Lemaitre, as the wife of a man wanted on a capital charge, may have been more of a potential than an actual widow; but this is the important fact: *she dressed like one*.

Anyhow, one may be glad that Messrs. Fraser and Company adopted Pilbrow's suggestion, and bought her an annuity. The exchange being what it was, this didn't come to so very much, and after all she had never done any of them any harm. But George and Bill might have been much interested if they had realised at the time the exact mixture of humanity and business foresight which prompted the inscrutable Pilbrow to resist their alternative proposal to pay her an allowance out of the firm's profits.

The word "inscrutable" has been used, but it is doubtful whether this epithet would suggest itself to most people who met Mr. Charles Pilbrow in the ordinary casual way. For he was no silent, mysterious, enigmatic figure. On the contrary he was a pleasant and, up to a point, even a talkative companion. His inscrutability was merely reflected from his master and showed itself in an extreme reluctance to make any

reference to Mr. Girling's name and a complete refusal to discuss Mr. Girling's plans. Apart from this, nobody could have been more helpful, more intelligent or more keen in everything connected with the re-establishment of the Agence Lemaître. His efforts during the first critical weeks were untiring and inspired, and his enthusiasm helped largely to carry them forward to success. The rival claimants to the ownership of the business whom Bill had at first expected to meet, never appeared. But it was Pilbrow who wrestled with and overcame the Paris police in their endeavours first to remove, and secondly to place official seals on everything in the room where the crime had been committed. His were the confidence-compelling circulars which one by one brought the English manufacturers back into the fold, when a clumsy move might have frightened them away for ever. His were the plans for re-organising the office on improved and more economical lines, and it was his determination which carried them through in the face of powerful opposition from the French staff. But at the end of the first month or six weeks, when at last it was possible to look again with some degree of hope towards the future, he suddenly took his departure, and after this his appearances were fitful and irregular, though never to an extent which could prevent him remaining fully informed on the general position of the business. To keep himself up-to-date on these details was always his first care whenever he returned, and as he checked them off on his fingers he would make sudden, sharp criticisms and suggestions which were always helpful and as often as not invaluable.

And yet although, or perhaps because the business was expanding again, there was no immediate prospect of any appreciable addition to the divisible profits. For Pilbrow's policy, and it was a policy which in the circumstances neither George nor Bill felt inclined to resist, was turning the whole thing into something more in the nature of a wholesale house and less in the nature of an agency every day. More than once application had to be made, through Pilbrow, to Mr. Girling for more money

with which to finance their undertakings, and every time the cash made its mysterious appearance at Mr. Girling's Paris bank. If all continued to go well, it really seemed as though in a year or two everyone concerned would be drawing a very comfortable income, but what used to wake Bill up in the night was his complete and continued ignorance as to what Mr. Girling's ultimate game could be. As long as he stood in with them, or even if he gave reasonable notice of his withdrawal, there seemed nothing to fear about the present unusual arrangement. But what was to stop him at any moment deserting them as suddenly as he had come to their assistance?

Yet this anxiety was only an occasional one, and as time went by it seemed less and less capable of having any definite basis. After all, Bill asked himself, was it likely that Mr. Girling, knowing his secretary's abilities as he must have done, would have sent him out to help them, if he had not meant them well? Was there any sense in fears which did not take this fact into consideration?

2

Bill's second Rule had to do with the important matter of correspondence, and may be briefly summarised as follows :—

A poor young man may write to a rich young woman once in six weeks without direct provocation, but he mustn't write oftener unless she asks him a definite question.

It was, of course, this second clause which made it so difficult to know whether one were keeping the rule or not. It was no good fixing on the presence of a note of interrogation as evidence of a definite question, because Leslie hardly ever made use of them at all. She seemed, in common with many of her sex, to prefer exclamation marks. And when she did ask a question, it was very likely one which it was quite impossible to answer.

One might take Bill's first letter, written within a

week of his arrival in Paris, and its acknowledgment as cases in point.

"This is to explain," Bill had written, and he really saw no rule standing in the way of such explanation, *"why I shan't be able to come and call, to thank you for that dance. I have had to come here suddenly on business, and it will probably be some months before I am in England again. I had been hoping so much that perhaps you would have let me go with you to some more, but I am afraid the season will be over and you will be gone from London before I can get back. If by any chance you are coming over to buy clothes this summer, I hope you will let me know."*

At this point he had stopped and re-read his composition, and in a sudden, self-conscious fear that he might have gone too far, had added: *"But I suppose it is getting rather late for that sort of thing, really."*

He was pleased with this letter on the whole. It struck him as so restrained, so natural, so altogether falling within his self-imposed restrictions. And yet when Leslie answered it, nearly a fortnight later, all she said was: *"Dear Bill,—Why should it be too late for me to buy clothes. Did you really think I was as old as all that! I hope you're making lots of money—Yours ever, Leslie Grahame."*

No interrogation mark, two questions, and neither of them capable of being answered. What did the Rules say about that?

Well, to be perfectly open about it, the Rule about correspondence was a failure from the beginning. The six weeks became something much more like a fortnight, and the proviso about definite questions lapsed altogether. But Bill was very careful. Though he described practically everything that he was doing, he never once said how he was hating it; in fact it was quite remarkable how little of his feelings on any subject under the sun he managed to convey. It would have been even more remarkable, if we didn't know that every letter represented a waste-paper-basket full of abandoned drafts—some of them abandoned in more senses than one.

And he never wrote again until he had had an answer.

Such answers as they were too. The one which has been quoted was as long as almost any of them. And yet, even in the shortest, there was always something tantalisingly characteristic, though it might be only a mis-spelling, which put him to tortures of impatient longing. He kept them in his despatch-box on his hotel dressing-table, and every one of them was read seven hundred times before it was put away. The whole bundle could, before the war, have been posted for a penny.

And the ridiculous thing about it all was that he really imagined that by staying abroad like this and overworking all the week and seeing nobody but his own staff and a quantity of French business men, he was going the right way about things to get over his inconvenient passion. Heaven knows that you and I aren't the kind of people to set ourselves up as experts on sentiment; we know better how to occupy our time; but even we could have told him what would happen if he went on like this. The harder he worked, the less he forgot and the more convinced he became that he was acting in a very noble and uncomfortable way. Yet we mustn't imagine him as happy. He wasn't in the least happy and he didn't even enjoy his misery, except once or twice, when, I am sorry to say, he constructed in his mind a slightly nauseous scene in which he was standing as godfather to Leslie's eldest child. He was very rich in this scene, and had premature white hair and a fur overcoat. And the organ was playing, which as a matter of fact it very seldom does at christenings, and Leslie was standing on the other side of the font, proud and lovely, but with a tear trembling in her eye when she looked at this distinguished friend of her early days, and thought of the long years of suppression and unhappiness which she was doomed to spend with her neglectful and brutal husband. It was all very, very sad, and beautiful, and absurd.

And Leslie's letters being what they were, Bill was

driven to other sources of information on a subject to which she only referred occasionally, and then in a distant and elliptical manner; namely, the continued rise to fame of the second Lord Longwood. For all that Leslie ever wrote was, "*Papa is very busy*," or "*Papa is still very busy*," and once, "*I am rather worried about Papa being so busy*." She never mentioned what he was being busy about, and it was left to the *Paris Daily Mail* and the English newspapers to fill in the gaps. From these any one might gather how rapidly Lord Longwood was coming to be regarded as indispensable to the various emergency committees with whose assistance the Government were at this time attempting to avoid the difficulty of making up their own minds. His appointment to the Taxation Committee, to the Deputy-Chairmanship of which he later succeeded on the death of Lord Moorgate, has already been mentioned. But the summer was not over before he had also taken his place on the Employment Committee and the Output Committee, and each time the illustrated Press was sprinkled with his photographs; playing golf, getting out of his car, sitting in his study, or carrying a portfolio in the neighbourhood of Whitehall. Other persons, both Lords and Commoners, were appointed to these committees—they could hardly have been committees otherwise—but from the attitude taken by the Press this fact might easily have been overlooked. Even the Amalgamated Society of Caricaturists (or whatever body it is that arranges these things) was driven to devising a formula to be used for representing him in cartoons.

A more than usually difficult job this must have been, for Lord Longwood had never cultivated a big collar or queer hats or any of the other insignia which most famous men are so careful to develop. If you were to meet him in a crowd, your eye might or might not light on him; but if it should do so, all it would see would be a quiet, kind-looking, elderly gentleman, blinking a little, probably, and fumbling at the buttons of his waistcoat or the bow of his tie. In these circumstances

the caricaturists were compelled to create a more or less imaginary being, whose sole distinguishing mark was a very shiny top-hat. This, of course, indicated great wealth, which may, after all, have been the facet which it was desired most particularly to emphasise. It was certainly a qualification of whose existence there could be no serious question.

Even with the suspicions which his peculiar knowledge of the circumstances had prepared in Bill's mind, he couldn't help wondering whether the thing might not, after all, be genuine. For there were none of the crudities of the Baxter business this time. Lord Longwood was never called upon to perform in public. One was presented with the picture of this enormously rich and gifted man, occupied in mysterious functions which were in some undislosed manner to undo the regrettable effects of the war. But one was never allowed close enough to be able to make out what he was really doing. There were no personal interviews whose authenticity or otherwise might have given him away. Always he was represented as carrying out his beneficent duties in a kind of mist of secrecy. One might detect his shadow on the blind even so near the centre of affairs as at a meeting of a cabinet sub-committee, but one was never admitted more closely than this to the heart of things.

Even without the existence of these suspicions, Bill might have found it hard to make out what was really going on. For no ordinary outsider ever knew which Government committees were to be taken seriously and which weren't. In these years of hand-to-mouth policies, even the Government themselves might have found it difficult to tell. And supposing that the whole thing could really be traced back to Harvey, to what was it all leading? Was there a definite plan of campaign in which these committees were preliminary steps, or was he just taking opportunities as they arose for the pure fun of the thing; entering his charge for each event as and when it cropped up, without any particular care or regard for the outcome of it all?

What, Bill wondered, would have been the final stage with the great Baxter, if a compulsory separation had not taken place?

Other people, who knew nothing of Austin Harvey, were beginning to be puzzled too. Maurice's letters to his brother in exile were few and far between—most of the London news came from Beatrix—, but in almost every one he referred to what he called the Longwood mystery.

"Of course," wrote Maurice, "*in these days the land is full of newspaper figureheads who are kept in position entirely by well paid publicity, and yet really count for nothing at all. I don't blame them if they like to spend their money that way, though I should be disbarred if I started it myself. But quite apart from the fact that Longwood is a gentleman, what beats me is what he wants to get out of it all. He's got a title, he's got money, and he's got quite a lot of influence in the City in a quiet sort of way, but I don't know what will happen to the last of these if he doesn't pull in his horns a bit. People don't like being mystified, except by professional mountebanks, and no one would call Lord L. that. There have been one or two rumours of his going in for some big kind of reconstruction, something to do with textiles I was told, but no one really believes in it. Why should he, after all, when he's only got to sit still and rake in as much money as anyone can hope to spend? By the way, as I can't get that house, I'm thinking of buying a car. I can't afford it, but I think Beatrix would like it, and it would be useful for golf . . .*"

The rest of the letter was all about ignition and suspension and other technicalities. Like all barristers, Maurice could achieve omniscience on any subject in the world in about five minutes. When Bill had last seen him, it was doubtful whether he would have known a speedometer from a sparking-plug. He had never taken any interest in the workings of the ancestral Panhard.

In one of his other letters Maurice wrote: "*Many thanks for your congratulations. I must say I never thought I should get it.*" ("It" being the recordership,

which had just fulfilled his and Beatrix's wishes.) "*By the way, I met the great Longwood at a dinner the other night and Leslie too. I went for them both about the White House. Lord L. didn't remember getting my letter, which I must say surprised me rather, but it turns out that what he has done is to give the place to Leslie—not to live in now, but when she gets married, which I should think would be jolly soon, for she's certainly a stunner. Beatrix took to her like anything. She seemed to be very well-informed on your movements and activities. L. himself struck me as looking ill; said he thought he'd been over-doing it . . .*"

So that was what had happened to the White House. There were, it seemed, to be no consolation prizes in this game. One either got everything, or nothing; and the white-haired man in the fur overcoat would have to find some other spot in which to spend his declining years.

And Maurice thought she would be married jolly soon, did he? Dash it all, he needn't have said so, even if he did. Clumsy great idiot! For the thousandth time since he had arrived in Paris, Bill all but decided to make any kind of excuse and dash back to London. But the Rules had said that he was to stick it out until his summer holiday, if he ever took one, and this time the Rules were in the end obeyed.

There was a postscript in Beatrix's handwriting to this last letter, for which we might perhaps find space.

"*Dearest Bill, you shouldn't really have sent such a wonderful doll, but I do hope it means you are feeling rich. Sylvia is enchanted with it, and has called it Christabel. After you, she says. I wonder if you see this?*"

3

The Continental might be all very well for George Lucas when he had come to Paris for three nights and was writing cheques for thousands of pounds, but for Bill's more permanent residence something a little simpler was needed. And accordingly, after one or two trial shots at unstarred hostleries of a not very satisfactory nature, he settled down in a bed-sitting-

room in the seventh arrondissement, and between this and the office in the Rue d'Uzès he oscillated every week-day, and as often as not on Sunday as well. Whenever Pilbrow was in Paris he would generally put up at the same little hotel, but this did not mean that the two of them then oscillated together. For while nothing would induce Pilbrow to walk, nothing could prevail on Bill to do anything else. Not that Bill's objection was due to any insular desire for exercise. It is more simply and perhaps less creditably explained by his distaste for sharing in the battles at the Métro stations and autobus stopping places; those battles which are so marvellously complicated by the devices which the authorities have adopted for enforcing liberty, equality and fraternity. If he had been in London during 1917 and 1918, there is little doubt that he would have learnt how to kick and be kicked by members of both sexes as well as anybody. But having missed this early training, he was a little uneasy about beginning now; fearing, possibly, to imperil the entente, but more probably from a reluctance to risk his own life. Yes, of the two, it seems likely that in the long-run Pilbrow got more actual exercise than Bill.

But if they didn't go to and from the office together, they saw plenty of each other during the rest of the day, and Bill could hardly have wished for a more unobjectionable companion. The assumed air of self-importance which had distinguished Mr. Pilbrow during their first two meetings, when he had had his reputation as a private secretary to keep up, completely passed away as he made himself better known. And though Bill was as easy as most men to get on with, nothing could have exceeded the tact with which Pilbrow introduced his various suggestions for dealing with the business problems that arose. If his velvet glove concealed an iron hand, as it probably did, it can only be said that it concealed it very thoroughly. Away from business he revealed himself as simple, unaffected and almost incredibly uneducated. The most obvious literary or historical reference, the kind of thing that is constantly

cropping up in the mouths of quite normally ill-informed persons, would leave him gaping and puzzled, but never ashamed to ask what had been meant. Bill used to lend him books, for which he always received profuse thanks; but there was no evidence that Pilbrow ever read them. And once Pilbrow lent Bill a book. It was called *The Gospel of Get-On*, and he said that he had found it very helpful. Bill found it dull, and would have found it depressing also, if Pilbrow had not so clearly failed to live up to its objectionable precepts. This seemed to show that it was, after all, possible to get on, without (as the book would have had you do) constantly bringing out something called your personality, and battering other people on the head with it. A curious couple in many ways, but they built up quite a real kind of friendship out of their often-interrupted time together; and this, at any rate, Bill could not help thinking might be considered as one of the few things which had not entered into Osman Girling's original plans.

Towards the end of July, George Lucas arrived on one of his flying visits, and he also was put up at the little hotel. His irrepressible optimism was in tremendous fettle, for, according to him, everything at Pardon Court was going swimmingly, and he was constantly calling on Bill to witness how he at any rate had never despaired of finding a way out of their difficulties. Pilbrow being also in Paris at the time, and he and George finding more than might have been expected in common, it was not until Bill was seeing his partner off to London again that he had a chance of speaking to him without interruption.

"Look here," he said, as they were driving to the station; "when you've quite done shouting about what fine fellows we all are, you might tell me what you think the end of all this is going to be. Have you picked up any more gossip about Girling?"

"No," said George. "Except that I did hear he'd gone to America for a bit."

"Then it looks as if we were safe for the time being."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure that I know, George. But do you think that he's finished with us yet?"

"Heaven only knows. What does it matter as long as we're making money?"

Bill shook his head doubtfully, and changed the subject.

"How's Mrs. Whalley looking after you?" he asked.

"Mrs. Whalley? Oh, nothing to complain of so far. Of course, she's not beautiful."

Bill had to agree.

"But then, no more are you," he added.

"That's very true," said George, gravely.

The sight of the waiting boat-train gave Bill a sudden spasm of homesickness.

"I may be coming over to see you in September," he said. "Maurice and Beatrix have taken a furnished house near Sandwich, and she's asked me to come if I can. I don't see why I shouldn't snatch a few days a little later on."

"Snatch as many as you like," said George. "My dear old Bill, you know perfectly well that there's no point in knocking yourself up over this business. Barrett can easily keep things going, if you want to take a holiday. Or I'd come over myself, if that would make you easier."

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Well, you look pretty green and beastly, old chap," said George consolingly.

"Oh, rot."

George peered into his partner's face.

"Perhaps you know best," he said.

"I'm all right," said Bill again, glaring at the platform.

Some unseen railway official blew a blast on a musical instrument.

"I'd better get in," said George, and he scrambled up the steps of his coach. "Well, good-bye, old man," he added, re-appearing at the window. "Take care of yourself, and all that kind of stuff. We'll all be dead in a hundred years."

Before Bill could answer this observation, the train gave a jerk and began to move. George vanished from the window, and his place was taken by an elderly native, who began blowing kisses over Bill's head.

"Oh, well," said Bill, and he walked away in the direction of the office.

July drew to an end in blazing heat, and August got under way with even more torrid skies. Many of the shops and offices shut themselves up for their annual holiday; and looking at the general condition of his business, Bill felt he would be justified in fixing himself up to take a week with Maurice and Beatrix towards the end of September, when Barrett should have returned from his leave. He wrote to Beatrix, informing her of his decision. If, he said, Maurice could be induced to spare a few minutes from the car, he would be delighted to take him on at golf; but if, as he quite expected, this was altogether out of the question, then he would be quite happy with his bucket and spade and Sylvia.

Beatrix wrote one of her nice letters in reply, pressing him to make the week a fortnight, but saying there was no need to decide until he turned up. "*We shan't be having any one else with us then,*" she said, "*because only barristers will still be having their holidays, and we see quite enough of them when we are in London. Yes, do bring your clubs and give Maurice a good beating. He has just got a certificate from a motoring school, and I'm sorry to say that he's a bit above himself about it. Come as soon and stay as long as you can.*"

Bill wondered whether the Rules would allow him to tell Leslie of his plans for being in England. Sometimes he thought they would, and sometimes he thought they wouldn't, and while he was still undecided, there came an unexpected interlude in his life of solitary routine, which had the effect of taking the decision out of his hands.

His daily progress between hotel and office took him through the part of Paris which is probably best known

to visitors, and he varied his route from week to week, taking the different bridges in turn, so as to include at one time or another almost all the streets in this district. In the mornings he saw and expected to see nothing but natives, for he had to get to work early. But when he came away again, the pavements were generally full of English and American visitors, and he always had a faint expectation that he might run across some one that he knew. But as June became July, and July became August, the class of visitor underwent a gradual change which made him realise that this expectation was less and less likely to be fulfilled. It seemed waste of time to examine the faces of the gangs of herded tourists who had taken the place of the earlier and more independent birds of passage, now all scattered to the seaside or the Alps. Still there was always plenty to look at and think about in the Paris streets, and as in this weather he had less reason than ever to hurry back to his bed-sitting-room, his evening route remained as unsettled and as tortuous as ever.

Thus it was that, standing in a reverie before a jeweller's shop in the Rue de la Paix late one afternoon, he was suddenly conscious of receiving what must and can only be described as a dig in the ribs. He sprang to his senses and turned quickly round, ready to be angry or dignified as the circumstances might demand, when, to his surprise, he discovered that the blow had been dealt by Miss Angela Lorden. He snatched hastily at his hat.

"Hullo," she said, in her deep voice. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Bill stammered. "I say, how are you?"

"I spoke to you three times," said Wog, "but nothing happened. Then I hit you. I hope it didn't hurt?"

"Not at all," Bill hastened to assure her. "I'm awfully sorry. I suppose I was thinking of something."

"I'm afraid you must have been. I could have picked your pocket as easy as winking. I say, Bill, do

you know that you've been sent in answer to my prayers?"

He staggered slightly at this unexpected use of his name, but quickly recovered himself.

"Why?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

"It's a long story," said Wog. "Where are you going? I'm stopping at the Crillon."

It seemed an odd address for the moneyless young woman of Leslie's story, but then even moneyless young women can have rich friends.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Bill. "I've just finished my work. I'm living here now, you know."

"Yes, I know. Leslie told me. Shall we walk?"

They adopted her suggestion.

"And how is Leslie?" he asked. No harm in that, anyhow.

"Oh, she's all right. She's just off to Scotland, I believe."

"For long?"

"Until October, I expect."

Damn! That settled it. What was the use of Maurice hiring a house within fifty miles of Hare Hall, if Leslie were going to be in Scotland? All pretence that he had ever been going to take a holiday for any other purpose than the hope of seeing her was swept away by the shock of this news. He might just as well have put it off until the Spring. He would have, what's more, if he'd only known.

"I say," said Wog, breaking in on these savage thoughts. "Don't you want to hear about me?"

"I beg your pardon. Of course I do. You were saying that it was a long story."

"Well, it is," said Wog. "But it all began last night, when I got into the wrong train."

Yes, of course she would get into the wrong train.

"And I suppose you lost your luggage?" Bill suggested.

"Rather," she answered with enthusiasm. "But I lost Uncle William and Aunt Freda and Virginia and

Frank as well. Carruthers," she added, which Bill took to be the joint surname of these missing relatives.

"But how do you mean you lost them?" he asked.

"We've all been in Switzerland," said Wog. "Jolly old Suisse. Had a ripping time. I won a prize at a tennis tournament." She illustrated this triumph by a vigorous movement with her arm, narrowly escaping hitting a passer-by in the beard.

"Look out!" said Bill.

"Oh, sorry. Pardon, I mean." She flashed a brilliant smile at her victim, who showed signs of raising his straw hat, but, seeing Bill, apparently decided otherwise. They forged ahead.

"It's this foul passport business," continued Wog. "They turned us all out in the middle of the night at some rotten station, and locked us into a ghastly kind of waiting-room. We all sweltered there for hours. Uncle William said he'd write to the *Times*. Then they suddenly let us out again. Crowds of people, bells ringing, engines hooting. Two trains standing side by side. I couldn't see the others anywhere, but I saw our sleeping car. At least, I thought I saw it. They oughtn't to make them all so like each other."

"Of course not," said Bill, sympathetically.

"In I got," Wog resumed, "and off we went. Well, of course it was the wrong one. The conductor was charming. Perfectly charming. And I had my dressing-case. That was something, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes," said Bill. "That was certainly better than nothing."

"Well, I got in here this morning. Lucky it was Paris; it might have been Constantinople for all I knew. I sent a telegram to the others at Calais. I hope they'll get it. I'd have gone on, but after I'd tipped the conductor, I was cleaned out. I had to walk to the Crillon."

"And were they pleased to see you there?"

"Oh, yes. Delighted. You see, we all stopped there on the way out, and I had rather a success with the concierge. But it's been a bit dull to-day," she con-

tinued. "All these shops and things, and me with only half a franc in Swiss money."

With the best will in the world, Bill couldn't help laughing.

"I'm glad you see the funny side of it," said Wog, laughing herself. "I only hope the others will."

"I suppose you didn't think of trying to get hold of me?" Bill asked.

"I thought of it all right, but I didn't know your rotten address."

"Well, I suppose the best thing I can do now is to let you have some money. Don't you think so?"

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," sang Wog, in her fine contralto; and again Bill was conscious that their progress through the capital was not passing altogether unnoticed by the inhabitants.

"How much would you like?" he suggested.

"Wait a minute," said Wog. "Here's the hotel, isn't it? Let's go in and see if they've answered my telegram."

They entered the hall, and almost immediately one of Miss Lorden's admirers dashed out from behind a counter with an envelope on a tray.

"Your telegram, miss," he said.

Wog opened it and passed it to her companion.

"*Stay where you are,*" Bill read. "*Returning to Paris.*"

"What do you make of that?" she asked.

There was no very striking evidence in this message that the senders had appreciated the humour of the situation.

"I don't know," said Bill, guardedly. "You see, I don't know your uncle and aunt."

"They're not really my uncle and aunt," Wog explained. "They're only sort of cousins. But it looks to me as if they were rather annoyed about it."

"I suppose it's just possible," Bill had to admit.

"But the trains looked *exactly* the same," she insisted. "They even smelt the same. Anyone might have done it."

"Of course they might."

"I wonder when they'll turn up," Wog mused.

It struck Bill that with the arrival of this telegram, his assistance was no longer required. He said something about having to get along.

"Oh, no," cried Wog, seizing him by the wrist. "You must stop and dine with me. You know you said you weren't going anywhere."

"But——"

"Of course you must. You can pay, you know, if you prefer it; in fact, I think you'll have to; but I'm not going to spend the evening alone. Not for anyone."

Perhaps he ought to stay, then. In the absence of inclination, duty was very vague in its instructions. What would Aunt Freda think? Would the conventions consider him or the concierge the more suitable guardian for Miss Lorden, pending her "sort of cousins'" return?

"Come on, Bill," she said, coaxing him. "A fellow countrywoman in distress. Sir Galahad to the rescue. You can go at half-past nine, sharp."

"Oh, very well, then," said Bill weakly. "But we'll dine here, and you'll be my guest."

"And you'll see that I behave myself. Is that it?"

"Yes," said Bill, with sudden firmness. "I will."

She laughed cheerfully.

"Wait here, then," she said. "I'll be down in ten minutes."

Nevertheless, she was sufficiently feminine to keep her squire waiting nearly half an hour before she re-appeared.

"I couldn't dress," she announced, "for obvious reasons. But I've put my hat on back to front in your honour, and I'm perfectly clean."

"I suppose you'd like a cocktail?" Bill suggested.

"Since you're so pressing, I think I would. Make it a Bronx."

Bill made it so.

"Here's our jolly good healths," said Wog, as she lifted her glass.

Yes, one might conceivably disapprove of Miss Lorden—not that Bill did himself—but one couldn't

dislike her. An odd friend for Leslie, though. Or was it so odd? Why should one always expect people's friends to be exactly like the people themselves? Experience was constantly showing the fallacy of this attitude.

"Cheer up," said Wog loudly.

Bill gave a start. Her exhortation had carried him back to that Sunday evening at Hare Hall, when Leslie had gone to bed with a headache. He really mustn't get so that people were always telling him to cheer up. They'd be asking what the matter was next.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with forced brightness. "I was only thinking of something. Shall we go along into the restaurant?"

"A Swiss half-franc for your thoughts," said Wog. Bill shook his head.

"They're not for sale," he answered.

It was a relief to find that, probably owing to the time of year, evening dress seemed rather the exception than the rule in the Crillon dining-room. Wog's hat, which was certainly rather fetching whichever way round she wore it, procured them a table and a waiter at once, and Bill gave his mind to ordering a dinner which he hoped she would find sufficiently sybaritic.

"What will you drink?" he concluded.

"Nothing, thank you. I only had that cocktail to annoy you."

"But my dear Miss Lorden, it didn't annoy me at all. Not in the least."

"How disappointing. You looked so young and innocent that I thought it was bound to."

And Leslie had complained because he was middle-aged. At twenty-nine it seemed hard to satisfy people.

"Dash it all," he said, "I may be innocent. I don't say I'm not. But I can't see what you mean by 'young'."

"Don't you? I'm sorry, Bill. I couldn't help ragging you. It's a rotten thing to do, especially after sponging on you like this."

A sudden thought came into Bill's mind.

"Talking of sponging," he said, "did you ever find yours?"

"My what?"

"Your sponge."

"Oh, shut up. I only said I'd lost it so as to have something to say."

Bill found this a little hard to follow.

"But why did you ring me up, then?" he asked.

"I—I wanted you to take me out to lunch."

"But why?"

"I just wanted to talk to you. But you sounded so rude that I decided it was no good."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Bill. "If only you'd explained. But as a matter of fact, I remember now, I was rather worried about something at the time."

"Business?" asked Wog.

"Yes. Business."

"What is your business?" she went on. "That is, if it isn't a rude question."

"I sell things."

"What sort of things?"

"Hosiery," said Bill.

Wog laughed.

"Do you mean stockings?" she asked. "If so, you needn't mind me."

"Well, stockings and other things," Bill explained.

"That's funny," said Wog.

He tried to defend himself.

"Well, somebody's got to sell them," he protested.

"And who more suitable than you? Quite so. But that wasn't why I called it funny."

"Where does the funniness come in, then?"

"It comes in because Lord Longwood and that Mr. Harvey are going to sell hosiery too."

"Are they?" Bill was puzzled.

"I hope it isn't a secret," said Wog, "but of course they always talk to each other as if I wasn't in the room, so I can't help hearing what they say."

"But I'm rather interested. What exactly are they going to do?"

"I don't know. But it's something big and exciting, and I know it's got to do with what you call hosiery, because they used the same word."

Bill suddenly remembered Leslie's story of their visit to Leicester.

"I wonder what it is," he said.

"I'd tell you, if I knew," said Wog. "But I'm afraid it was all rather over my head. Stocks and shares, you know. I say, what do you make of that Harvey?"

"I hardly know him," Bill answered. "Why?"

"But I thought it was you who produced him."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did. But I'd only seen him once."

"And you liked him?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think I did. I thought he seemed rather a good fellow."

"Oh," said Wog.

"Why, what's the matter with him?"

Wog shrugged her shoulders.

"But what has he done?" Bill persisted.

"Well, for one thing, he's taken to calling me 'Wog'."

"Has he, by Jove?" Bill would have been less surprised to hear that she had taken to calling him "Austin."

"Yes. And he tried to call Leslie 'Leslie'."

"He did? What infernal cheek!" said Bill in a sudden fury.

"Leslie, of all people in the world," added Wog.

"And she let him?"

"Look here, Bill," said Wog, with sudden seriousness.

"We mustn't discuss what Leslie does. Leslie's absolutely perfect. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Bill. "I know that."

"Leslie's an angel," she went on. "Nobody will ever know quite what she did for me when—— Perhaps you knew that I'd had some trouble?"

Bill nodded.

"I can't tell you how wonderful she was to me then. Or how wonderful she's been ever since. You may

think just because she's rich and can do whatever she likes, that she's the same as all the others. But she's not. She's real. Leslie's only got one fault, and that isn't one really. She will think everybody is as nice as she is. And some people are foul enough to think that she's putting it on. That's what happens, you know."

It seemed to Bill that in spite of Wog's embargo, they were discussing Leslie, and doing it pretty thoroughly; but he felt no inclination to stop her.

"Yes," continued Wog the philosopher. "That's the world all over. But what are you to do with angels, when they won't protect themselves?"

"Protect themselves from what?"

Wog made no answer. She was resting her chin on the palm of her hand, and gazing into the distance. Twice she drew in her breath as though she were going to say something, but each time she seemed to shake her head ever so slightly, as if finally dismissing some thought from her mind.

"People must do things for themselves," she announced at length. "It's no good other people trying to do things for them. Is it?"

It will never be known what answer Bill might or might not in the end have made to this generalisation, for while he was still puzzling over it and wondering what to say next, his eye was suddenly attracted by a little scene near the door of the restaurant. An elderly lady and a young man, both very English in appearance, and both bearing every sign of having travelled fast and far, had ranged themselves on either side of and seemed now to be arguing with the maître d'hotel. His gesticulations were so superbly in character that Bill was on the point of inviting Wog to turn and watch them, when at this moment the whole party began advancing towards his table. Good Lord, they must be Aunt Freda and Frank!

"I say," Bill asked hastily; "is that your aunt—I mean your cousin?"

"Where? Oh, yes. And Frank. Don't they look furious! Now, then, Sir Galahad!"

Bill rose from his seat, as he hoped that Sir Galahad would have done, and awaited their onslaught. Wog, on the other hand, sat still where she was.

"Hullo!" she called out cheerfully, as they came within speaking distance. "Have you had dinner? If not, you'd better join us."

Which struck Bill as a very Wog-like opening, but one which in all the circumstances was not perhaps best calculated to put every one at their greatest ease.

The effect of this greeting on Aunt Freda was, indeed, to strike her with sudden aphasia. She goggled and glared in speechless anger. But Frank (whose appearance Bill rather liked, though perhaps he was a thought too much like all the young men at the Stewarts' dance) broke out at once.

"I say, Wog," he said. "What the devil have you been up to now?"

And at this, Wog also rose to her feet.

"May I introduce Mr. Fraser?" she asked. "Bill, this is my cousin, Captain Carruthers. Wasn't it lucky, Frank? I ran into Mr. Fraser when I was out this evening, and he was kind enough to give me dinner. Though I must say," she added, turning again to the embarrassed Bill, "you weren't very keen on it. Were you, Bill?"

Frank shot out a curt, "H'are yah?" And at this moment Aunt Freda recovered her powers of speech.

"I think you had better come upstairs with me now, Angela," she said. "I should very much like to hear what you have been doing since you left us all in the middle of the night."

"But I haven't finished my dinner, Aunt Freda," Wog protested.

Talk of butter not melting in people's mouths. Her voice was a perfect triumph of innocence and purity—and of provocation.

"I dare say that in the circumstances Mr. Fletcher will excuse you," said Aunt Freda. And this attack on Bill's surname might have served her well, if Wog had not instantly replied: "Fraser, Aunt Freda. Mr.

Fraser"; thereby rendering it impossible for the poor lady to continue disregarding him. Bill and she bowed at each other in deep solemnity.

"Well, Angela, are you coming?" Aunt Freda began again, but with a sensible increase of impatience and consequent loss of dignity. Bill noticed that the diners at the neighbouring tables were beginning to concentrate their attention on the little group, in a way which Wog alone found it possible to disregard. And at this point, to his great surprise, Frank suddenly came over to the enemy.

"Oh, hang it all, Mother," he said. "Let her finish her dinner. I mean to say—I mean . . ."

"Thank you, Frank," said Aunt Freda, though for what exactly she was thanking him was far from clear, and Bill could certainly detect no sound of gratitude in her voice. And then, with a last, tremendous effort towards re-asserting her authority, she turned and moved towards the door. There can be little doubt that she counted on the threatening and overwhelming manner of this manœuvre to draw both her son and her cousin after her to where she could attack and demolish them, either singly or together, without the annoyance of the present publicity. But if this were her intention it failed. Frank, indeed, after wavering for a moment did follow her as far as the door. But when she turned there and found that he was alone, Bill saw her brush him aside with some utterance which made him fall back in sudden disorder; and the next instant she had disappeared into the hall by herself.

And simultaneously with this final vision, Bill's mental discomfort, which, as may be imagined, was deep and powerful, was aggravated by the physical pain of a fierce blow on the ankle.

"Sit down, Bill," said Wog hurriedly. "Sit down, if you love me. When I kick you again, you can go. I'll explain afterwards. Quickly, *please!*"

Now, as we well know, it would be the height of inaccuracy to say that Bill loved this extraordinary girl. In fact it would be well within the truth to say that at

this moment he came nearer to disliking her than he had ever been either before or since this episode. Moreover, if her second kick should be as violent and as well-directed as her first, he might even find considerable difficulty in ever making his escape at all. Nevertheless, such was the force of her appeal, that he found himself sitting down. And as he did so, Frank rejoined them.

"Come along, Frank," said Wog hospitably. "Come and have some dinner."

"I say," he answered; "what on earth made you do that?"

"Do what, Frank?"

He looked uncomfortable, clearly disliking the idea of making his meaning any plainer in the presence of a stranger.

"Well, I mean to say," he tried; "you'd much better have got it over. It'll only be worse for you later on, you know."

"I don't agree, Frank. Why, you know she was *longing* for an excuse to come to Paris again. Do sit down, there's a dear."

He did sit down.

"I suppose you expect me to believe," he went on, "that you really did make a mistake."

"I don't care what you believe. I think you're a beast."

Let the Franks of this world always remember that women flourish on anachronisms. Here is Wog, most modern of the moderns, shaking off the best part of a century without turning a hair. And of course he goes stumbling after her.

"No, I didn't mean that," he protested. "Really I didn't."

But whatever he may have meant, he had implanted a very grave suspicion in Bill's mind. A suspicion which has never wholly departed from it.

"Then you'll take my side?" asked Wog.

"Of course I will. Oh, yes. Thanks. Please." These last interjections being addressed to the waiter

who was enquiring whether monsieur would have the dinner.

"In that case I don't mind apologising to Aunt Freda," continued Wog, graciously. "But you'll see, Frank, when she wakes up and finds she's here after all, she won't mind a bit."

"I hope you're right," said Frank, doubtfully; and brief as had been Bill's opportunity for judging Aunt Freda's character, he could not help sharing in this uncertainty.

"Well, even if she does," Wog added, "it won't matter as long as you stick up for me."

Frank's rather prominent, pale eyes seemed to protrude still further from his head, and he put up one hand to settle his tie.

"You're a wonder, Wog," he said; and then suddenly turning to Bill, he added: "Isn't she?"

Bill opened his mouth to confirm this statement, of whose entire truth he had no shadow of doubt, when, unexpectedly as before, the second kick arrived precisely on the same spot as the first.

Despite his best intentions he was unable to repress a sharp cry of agony.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Wog, coolly.

"I'm sorry," said Bill. "I hit my leg on the chair. I—I got a kick from a mule once, and it still hurts sometimes when I knock it."

"A mule?" repeated Wog. "That's good." And she had the impertinence to laugh.

"It's no joke, Wog," said Frank kindly. "I know those mules."

Temptation overcame Bill.

"Ah," he said, rising to his feet. "I wonder if you know this one."

What a splendid exit this line and Frank's puzzled look would have made, if it had only been a play. This was Bill's thought as he surveyed the result of his indiscretion. But as it wasn't a play, he had to explain that he had some important work waiting for him, and that as he had practically finished dinner and Miss

Lorden's relations had turned up, perhaps he might be excused.

"Must you really?" asked Wog.

"I really must."

"Well, it's been awfully good of you," said the simple-minded Frank. "You know Wog's quite mad, so it was rather a relief to find that she'd discovered some one to look after her."

It was clear that he was going as near as his training would permit to apologising for his mother's quite understandable rudeness. But Bill wasn't surprised to find that he was not pressed to stay.

"Well, good-bye," he said, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye," said Wog. The violence of her grip took the place of the wink which she was obviously longing to give him.

"Thanks most awfully," said the two cousins again, and Bill left them.

He found his waiter on the way out and gave him a note to cover the cost of one dinner and a tip. He no longer saw why, in all the circumstances of the case, he should pay for two. And indeed, as he gave a last glance back at the table before leaving the room, he was more certain than ever that his decision was right. For the simple-minded Frank had already drawn his chair closer to that of his fascinating cousin, and it was clear that as far as he was concerned Bill was completely forgotten.

Our bachelor wandered across to the river and stood by the parapet, watching the dark water slipping by, while the trams roared behind him and the lights sparkled on the opposite bank. Above his head stars were beginning to gleam faintly from a pale-green sky.

And so Austin Harvey had tried to call her "Leslie," had he?

Damn it all! he wasn't keeping out of the way to help Austin Harvey. What a horrible idea. . . .

And Leslie's only fault was that she thought everybody as nice as she was.

But Lord Longwood would never allow it. Or would

he realise? Or was there anything for him to realise?

Bill suddenly longed to go back into the Crillon dining-room, seize Wog by the throat and force her to tell him what she knew; what she thought.

But there was that pop-eyed fellow. A violent fury swept over him at the thought of the innocent Frank. Why, he asked unreasonably, should Frank have all the money which he obviously had, and receive all the encouragement which he was obviously receiving, when other people—far better people too—had neither of these things? It was all dashed easy for fellows like Frank. Frank had been so dashed certain of things and so dashed pleased with himself, that he hadn't even minded finding Wog dining alone with another man.

And Wog had known he wouldn't mind. Clearly; or she wouldn't have risked it. And why? Because the man was Bill Fraser, of whom it now appeared that it wasn't even possible to be jealous.

"The man of whom nobody was jealous."

What an appalling epitaph!

The sky turned from pale-green to dark turquoise, and from dark turquoise to black. The lights in the buildings on the opposite bank were beginning to go out. Bill suddenly found himself shivering, and with a wrench, straightened his back and moved towards the nearest bridge.

"I wish," he muttered, "I wish I'd never met the damned girl."

Oh, no. He didn't mean Leslie.

4

But when the morning came, Wog Lorden was already forgiven. And forgiven she remained, even though no more was heard from her in fulfilment of her promise to account for her behaviour. For, indeed, Bill's little glimpse of the scene at the dinner-table as he had left the restaurant was all the explanation that he needed. As long as there had been any danger of her Frank wishing to quarrel with her, the original host was to be

kept in attendance as a preventative; but once this risk had been safely passed, then the sooner he took himself off the better. All right, Wog. In the clear light of this sunny morning, there will be no further objections from Bill Fraser. If one can't be a little selfish at twenty-two, or whatever it is you are, when can one be?

So Bill's spirit hovered over the Crillon during the next few days, breathing the very best of hymeneal wishes for Wog and her pop-eyed swain, but his body took care to avoid the neighbourhood of the Place de la Concorde, for it seemed to him that his part in this particular romance had now been played. And no further unexpected assaults on his ribs or ankles came to interrupt his devious wanderings through the Paris streets.

At the beginning of September the inscrutable Pilbrow made another of his sudden descents on the Rue d'Uzès, and once more Bill spent a busy day going into every detail of the agency's affairs with him. Pilbrow's cross-examination was as keen and penetrating as ever, but he had an unusual air of pre-occupation, and several times sat frowning in silence at the answers which he received, pursing his lips and wrinkling his high forehead. All this was so unlike his customary manner, that Bill felt justified at length in asking him if anything were wrong.

"Wrong?" repeated Pilbrow. "No, nothing's wrong. But——" He waited for a moment, and then suddenly added: "If you really want to know what the matter is, I've had a bit of a disagreement with the governor."

"Do you mean Mr. Girling?"

Pilbrow's mouth twitched more violently than ever at the mention of this forbidden name.

"Yes," he said. "And what frightens me now is that I'm not sure I didn't get my own way."

Bill could quite appreciate the alarming elements in this admission.

"Did you, though?" he asked. "I don't wonder that you're nervous."

Pilbrow gave an uneasy smile.

"Look here," he continued suddenly. "I want you to know that whatever happens, I'm doing my best for you and Lucas. Don't forget that."

"I'm sure you are," said Bill. "But what is it that's going to happen?"

"I don't know. Nothing, very likely."

And with this amount of explanation Bill had to be content, for nothing further could the inscrutable one be prevailed upon to say. In fact, at this point, as if by changing the subject to prevent any further questioning, he unexpectedly began offering details of what he described as one of the governor's little gambles. Bill listened, at first with impatience and then with a detached kind of interest, to the story of the Santa Caterina silver mine, but it was only after Pilbrow had been talking for some time that he realised that he was being pressed to adventure his hard-earned savings by doing what was represented to him as "coming in on the ground floor."

"But my dear old fellow," he said. "I know all about that kind of thing. Do you know that I've had a ticket in a Derby sweepstake for the last nineteen years, and that I've never drawn a horse yet? What's the use of a man with that kind of luck meddling in silver mines?"

"Well, if it's good enough for the governor," Pilbrow protested, "it ought to be good enough for you."

"I don't see that. If I keep out of it, I haven't a shadow of doubt that Mr. Girling will clean up another fortune. Why should I come along and spoil his luck for him?"

"But it's the nearest thing to a certainty there's ever been."

"All right," said Bill, in final desperation. "Show me the gilt-edged prospectus and the plate-sunk scrip. I'll put in a fiver, if it's only to keep you quiet. But I think the promoters ought to be warned."

"A fiver's no good," said Pilbrow in scorn. "They're only issuing five-hundred-dollar units."

"Then I'm afraid I shall have to stand out," said Bill ; and this, in the end, was what he did. Pilbrow continued to paint the most glowing pictures of the fortune which was thus being flung on one side, but it was no use.

"I don't say that seven thousand per cent. isn't a fair return on one's money in these hard times," Bill admitted, "but, honestly, I'd sooner keep out of it."

"Oh, all right, then," said Pilbrow sulkily, and at last the subject was dropped. But it was only when he was alone again that night that Bill realised how completely the argument about the silver mine had driven out of his head the story of Pilbrow's disagreement with Mr. Girling. And once again his nameless fears and suspicions, which had for so long been dormant, kept him company through the small hours. If only, he felt, he could get hold of things the right way round, this conversation with Pilbrow must have helped to throw some kind of light on the game which Osman Girling was playing. But though he thought and thought, no kind of enlightenment came to him, and in the end he fell asleep. In the morning Pilbrow's manner had resumed its ordinary calm, and during the remaining three or four days of his stay in Paris, he made no further reference of any kind either to the governor or to the governor's gamble. Bill's half-formed suspicions began to die away again. Pilbrow's training in Mr. Girling's office had probably given him unusual ideas as to the amount of money which more normally-situated people were prepared to risk on these outside chances ; and as for the disagreement, why should that have anything to do with the Agence Lemaître ? Bill turned his attention to counting up the remaining days which separated him from his approaching holiday.

More and more slowly they seemed to drag themselves by, but their movement was just perceptible to the naked eye, and in the end the morning did actually arrive when, instead of taking his daily walk across the river, he ordered a taxi and drove to the Gare du Nord. The long stretch up the Rue de La Fayette was accomplished

with not more than five narrow escapes from sudden death, and here he was at last, safely seated in a train full of returning holiday-makers, more glad than any of them, after his four months' exile, to be on the way home. So exhilarated, indeed, did he become, that he accepted the advances of an Anglo-Indian gentleman who shared his compartment, with the result that he was still hearing the story of his life when they reached Victoria. There was scarcely any limit to the confidences which were thus thrust on him, for the Anglo-Indian gentleman disclosed the secrets not only of his own digestion, but also of those of his two wives, both of whom Bill learnt, without surprise, were dead. Almost the last words of this entertaining companion, before the train finally drew to a standstill, were employed to press Bill to dine with him at his club any night that he might care to select. But in the very middle of one of his sentences, the spirit of London reached in through the carriage window and seized him. Bill saw him stiffen. "Good heavens!" he could be seen thinking to himself. "Have I been asking a stranger to dine with me? What on earth can I have been thinking of?" And so completely had the Anglo-Indian gentleman already resumed his status as a Londoner, that he dashed from the still-moving train and hurried off into the crowd without even bidding his discarded guest good-bye.

In another moment Bill had spotted his partner's spectacles gleaming in the lamplight, and presently they were driving together towards the flat, through the most delightfully welcoming mixture of fog and rain. Surely it was worth having put up with all those months of clear skies to be returning at last in such splendidly national weather. Bill drew the poisonous vapours deep into his lungs, while his whole being glowed with patriotism. Was there anything in the world to beat Victoria Street on a wet night?

Once again he was climbing the perpendicular staircase to his old home, and receiving Mrs. Whalley's kindly comments on the alleged sickliness of his appear-

ance. In the excitement of their reunion she became almost motherly, and seldom had Bill disliked her less. Yes, when all was said and done, and whatever else he might find to begin worrying about in the morning, it *was* rather fun to be back at the flat again, if only for one evening.

"Now, then, George," he said, as they settled down in the sitting-room, "tell me all the news. Have we got old Stromberg's stuff shipped yet?"

"The last lot will go off this week," said George, and he proceeded to execute one of his well-known fantasias on the splendid way in which everything was going. There had actually been signs of a revival of business with Stockholm, and what with this and M. Thibaud's efficiency, for which no words were too high, and the French orders which were coming along for the autumn, he honestly thought that things had never looked brighter.

"You'll see," he said; "by next spring we'll be able to buy old Pilbrow out again, and then that'll be the end of Girling, and we shall be on our legs at last. What's that? Oh, do leave the exchange alone for a minute. It's bound to be better by then."

"And how's the queerness at Leicester getting along?" asked Bill.

"Everything's perfectly normal. I saw old Ledbury about a fortnight ago, and he was as pleasant as anything. You know, I'm beginning to think that we came in for the tail of some kind of storm last spring; but whatever it was, it's all blown over by now. I've been watching some of those people's shares. They were jumping about like anything three months ago, but they're steady enough now. You can depend on it, that's what it was."

"You've not seen Mr. Girling, I suppose?"

"No. But I saw the other blighter the same time that I saw Ledbury."

"Who? Sir Donald Hammersmith?"

"Yes. He's a director right enough. They've got his name on their notepaper now. But he seemed quite harmless and pleasant."

"I wonder if we'll ever get to the bottom of it," said Bill.

"I don't think we shall. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that all Girling ever wanted was to prevent any kind of crisis cropping up last May. He might have had plenty of good reasons for that, and there's no doubt that if Lemaitre had gone smash, some of the people over here would have felt the draught a bit."

Bill shook his head.

"That won't explain why he wanted us to give the order to Peter Miller's," he said.

"I think it does," George answered. "I think he wanted to bolster them up too. He probably found some other way of doing it after we'd cleared out."

"But why all the secrecy?"

"That was just Girling. He probably can't help doing things like that."

"I suppose you didn't get any change out of Pilbrow, when he was over here, did you?" Bill asked.

"No," said George. "He wouldn't talk about anything except some rotten silver mine that he wanted me to take a block of shares in."

"And did you?"

"No, I told him I couldn't afford it. He seemed rather annoyed about it. And now, look here, Bill. I've made up my mind about something."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"I'm not going to let you go back to Paris."

"But, my dear old fellow, I must."

"No, you mustn't. I'm going instead."

"But——"

"No, Bill. It's all settled. It's been perfectly obvious the whole time that you've hated being away, and I think it's jolly good of you to have stuck it. Well, you've had four months of it, and I'm going to take my turn now."

"But——" Bill again protested, and was again interrupted.

"No. I've really thought this out. It's the only sensible way of doing things; but even if it wasn't, it's

going to be done. So you can just make up your mind to it."

"But what's the point, when I'm out of touch here and you're not?"

"That's exactly what my point is. We can't have you getting out of touch. And I don't want to get out of touch with Paris either. It isn't a question of anybody being unselfish, it's just plain common sense. We've got to take it in turns."

What was Bill to say? He certainly had hated being in Paris, but he would have hated being anywhere else just as much. And the arrangement was sensible enough in itself; he quite saw that. Besides, if Leslie were to be in Scotland for another month, it wouldn't particularly matter where he was."

"Well, we needn't make up our minds to-night," he said, at length.

"You needn't," answered George, "if you don't want to. But mine's been made up for some time. I'll see you again in London next week, and after that I'm moving across to the Rue d'Uzès."

"Well, we'll talk about it again, if you like, when I get back from Maurice's," said Bill; and then, seeing that his partner would have continued to argue, he added hastily: "Now then, I want to hear all about the cricket I've missed."

George's eyes instantly began to shine with a different, but no less fanatical expression.

"All right," he said. "Where shall I begin?"

"Begin at the beginning."

"Well," said George, "the whole trouble with county cricket this season has been . . ."

By the time that he had dealt with this preliminary point, it had become clear that it would be waste of time for Bill to spend the rest of the night at an hotel, and the discussion on cricket was abandoned, to give place to a further tremendous argument as to who was going to sleep in the one bed. George took the view that the flat (if you could call it a flat) was Bill's flat, and the bed, consequently, Bill's bed. And Bill,

though he accepted this major premise, held that it gave him the right to sleep anywhere in the establishment that he chose, and announced that as a matter of preference and of fact he was going to sleep on the sofa. In the end he had his way. Muttering and grumbling, George withdrew to the bedroom, leaving his partner in exhausted possession of the field of battle. And here, in a slowly-dispersing mist of pipe smoke, we leave him to dream of trains and steamers and silver mines and Anglo-Indians and the French exchange, and once to wake with a start on learning from some ghostly informant that Sir Donald Hammersmith has taken up his residence at the White House.

5

The weather, which had made such special efforts to provide a suitable welcome for the returning traveller, was no less kind in following this up with a week of September sunshine. Maurice's temporary residence contained a parched tennis-court and was within a very short distance of the golf-course, and every morning a prolonged debate took place as to which of these sports should be indulged in after lunch, and every afternoon the problem was solved by Maurice saying that he thought on the whole it would be good for Beatrix to have a run in the car. Not that Beatrix ever came—except once, on the afternoon of the picnic—for she had a strange mistrust of her husband's powers as a chauffeur, and preferred to spend her time in the garden; looking, Bill thought, everything that a mother should, as she sewed and knitted and sent out occasional gentle calls to Sylvia, where she was giving her dolls their endless, Barmecide's tea.

It wasn't so much that Maurice was a reckless driver; but he was certainly a very unlucky one. Nobody's tyres can ever have exploded, their radiator have leaked, their petrol have mysteriously evaporated or their carburettor have attracted dead flies to its inmost parts in the way that Maurice's did. And it was a relief to Bill to find that the crumpled mudguards, whose omin-

ous appearance had filled him with alarm when he had first seen them waiting for him outside the station, had reached this condition entirely through his brother's attempts to get in and out of the shed which did duty for a garage. Even at the picnic, where the whole distance to be travelled was less than two miles each way, disaster overtook this unhappy vehicle; for a wandering policeman had suddenly appeared on a bicycle and insisted on its removal from the place where it was waiting to the grass at the side of the road. In his haste to avoid the penalties for obstructing the highway with which the policeman was threatening him, Maurice had backed his beloved car right over the grass into a ditch on the further side, where its back wheels ceased to engage with anything except slime and nettles, and from which it had to be rescued with the utmost ignominy and at considerable expense by a couple of farm horses. Beatrix's happy laughter throughout the whole of this episode would have furnished complete proof to any one who might have required it of the success of her marriage. For Maurice had been disappointed, but not in the least annoyed. His extraordinary confidence, which Bill would have given so much to share, remained absolutely intact, and every evening as they separated for bed, he would say: "Now, about to-morrow. What do you say to a *really* long drive somewhere?"

In fact, in so far as a holiday should consist of a continual uncertainty as to where one will be and what one will find oneself doing at any time within the next twenty-four hours, Maurice's holiday, in which Bill now took up his part, was being a complete success. Beatrix's catering, too, although conducted according to her in the face of superhuman difficulties, was a revelation and a dream after those months of monotony in the Paris hotel; while Sylvia had developed a new gift of telling, instead of merely listening to stories, which made her in Bill's eyes more fascinating than ever. Sylvia's romances were entirely devoted to the lives of her dolls, whose complicated relationship dis-

closed the most lamentable laxness in their morals. One could never have believed, if she had not insisted that it was so, that that anaemic beauty with the movable eyes was married to a pink bear, or that the bear was godmother (no, not godfather) to a celluloid postman, grandfather, in turn, of the original beauty. But with such material, any novelist will see at once what strikingly original plots were available. One really wondered that these creatures could be content to spend so much of their time seated round the same tea-table.

Maurice showed no awkward curiosity as to the history of Bill's Paris venture. The moment never arrived when Osman Girling's name had to be altered or suppressed. It was Beatrix who took the opportunity of Maurice's absence at the telephone one evening to ask her brother-in-law how he was getting on.

"Oh, we're getting on splendidly," said Bill. "I've been kept rather hard at it, you know; but after all, there's no particular harm in that."

"I'm so glad, Bill. Do you know, I always used to think it was rather a mistake your going into the City, but it only shows how wrong I was."

"Mistake?" said Bill. "Why?"

"I don't know. But one always imagines that City people ought to be more pushing. Like the people in advertisements; with jaws, you know," she explained elliptically.

"Well, dash it all, Beatrix, my jaw's all right. You talk as if I was like the Chinless Man."

"But you don't push yourself very much, Bill. Do you?"

"I don't trample on people's faces particularly," Bill admitted. "I don't suppose you'd think very much of me if I did."

"I say, Bill."

"Yes?"

"Why don't you get married?"

"But why should I?" he asked, looking out of the window.

"Everybody ought to get married," said Beatrix, with calm certainty. "Anybody who doesn't is just wasting their time."

"You say that just because——"

"No, I don't, Bill. I say it because it's true."

"Married people——" Bill began sententiously, and then stopped. He found that he had suddenly forgotten what he was going to say.

"Bill," said Beatrix. "I wish you'd tell me. I wouldn't tell a soul, you know."

"Yes, you would," said Bill unguardedly. "You'd tell Maurice." He had remembered the conspiracy about the recordership.

"Then there *is* somebody?" cried Beatrix in triumph.

"No, there isn't," Bill lied. And then he added weakly: "Besides it's quite out of the question, anyhow; and, Beatrix, it's really no good talking about it. Really it isn't."

"I knew all the time why you'd gone to live abroad," said Beatrix coolly, as she snapped the thread of her sewing.

"You knew?" said Bill in horror.

"Yes. And I think it was very silly of you, if you ask me."

Bill certainly hadn't asked her. But one couldn't leave the thing in the air like this.

"Why 'silly'?" he enquired.

"Well, I should think it very silly, if anyone ran away from me."

"But you don't understand," said Bill. "It wouldn't make any difference to—I mean, it wouldn't make any difference in this case."

"Then why do it?" asked Beatrix.

This was certainly a new point of view. Bill considered it for a moment, and then he said:

"I didn't want to make an ass of myself."

"Oh," said Beatrix, and she had the cunning to leave it at that. The result was inevitable.

"You see, you don't know who it is," said Bill. "How

can you possibly say anything, if you don't know who it is?"

"Perhaps I don't," said Beatrix, with still more diabolical craftiness. Bill smelt the trap, though he couldn't quite see where it was. He plunged away.

"And anyhow," he said, "I'm not going back to Paris until next year. George is going to take a turn out there."

It was the first time that he had admitted it, even to himself. But as he spoke, he realised that he had meant to do it all along.

Beatrix held up a needle to the light, and prepared to thread it.

"I'm glad of that," she said. She made another bad shot at the eye of the needle, and then went on. "Did Maurice tell you," she asked, "that we'd met Lord Longwood and Leslie Grahame out at dinner while you were away?"

Bill nearly jumped out of his chair. But Beatrix was still engrossed with her needle. That was lucky, wasn't it? If he said something quickly, she wouldn't notice.

"Yes, he did mention it," he managed to answer. And then, with really despicable weakness, he added: "Why?"

"I thought she was so extraordinarily nice," said Beatrix. "And so extraordinarily lovely."

He was glad that she hadn't said "pretty" or "good-looking" or "handsome." There was only the one, exactly right word for Leslie.

"Did you?" he asked incautiously.

Beatrix transferred her eyes from the threaded needle to her sewing, without once looking at Bill. But you are making a great mistake, if you think that the slightest detail of his expression had escaped her.

"Yes," she said. "And she seemed so fond of you, Bill."

This was too much. What right had Beatrix got to go playing with him in this way? Hadn't she got any heart? Yet one must make some kind of answer, or

the whole show would be given away for good and all.

"That's funny," said Bill.

God knows where the funniness came in. If Leslie thought that everybody was as nice as she was, she could hardly help being fond of him. And of everybody else too. Damn them!

Beatrix looked up suddenly from her work.

"Why should it be funny, Bill?" she asked.

Bill swallowed a nervous cough. It really wasn't fair to have people down to stay with you, and than rag them like this. If Beatrix meant anything, why on earth couldn't she say it, instead of sitting there staring at one in that way?

"Well, I mean to say," he began, "I only meant—I mean—that . . ."

There was a rattle at the door-handle. Maurice was coming back. He was saved!

" . . . I think that's Maurice," he finished lamely.

"It says here," Maurice began, without waiting to discover whether he were interrupting anybody or not, "that these new Spraggett cars do twenty-five to the gallon, and the fellow went all the way to Rome and back on the same oil. I'd like to have a look at one of those."

"Would you, darling?" asked Beatrix kindly. "Did you get through to London all right?"

"Oh, dash," said Maurice. "I forgot all about it. And it took three hours last time. I'll ask Ada to put through a call first thing in the morning. I say, Bill, what do you say to a real long day in the car to-morrow? Beatrix is coming; aren't you, darling?"

"No, thank you," said Beatrix. "The last long day we spent in the car, we were in a garage all the time."

Maurice looked a little pained. He didn't realise that he was being punished for coming into the room when he wasn't wanted.

"Well, what do *you* say?" he asked, turning again to Bill. "I had an idea just now, when I was looking at the maps, that we might go over and see the White

House. It's only forty-seven miles. It would be rather fun, don't you think?"

"Yes," said Beatrix, before Bill could answer. "And you might telegraph and ask yourselves to lunch with Lord Longwood. That's a splendid idea, because the cook's going to see her aunt at Margate. At least," she added, with some doubt, "she says it's her aunt."

"Then that's what we'll do," said Maurice. "We'll obviously get no lunch, if we stay here."

"But I think they're in Scotland," said Bill, avoiding Beatrix's eye.

"Scotland?" she repeated. "Are you sure, Bill?"

"Practically," he answered, still looking towards his brother.

"Well, that doesn't make any difference," said Maurice. "We'll lunch at Maidstone or somewhere on the way, and we'll have tea at the Hare Arms. Eh?"

Well, one couldn't say that one didn't want to go and see the White House except by oneself, or with Leslie. One couldn't have said this, even if Beatrix hadn't suddenly become so infernally inquisitive. Moreover, the chances were about a thousand to one against Maurice ever reaching any destination for which he set out.

"All right," said Bill. "Let's do that, then."

He flattered himself that he had said it rather well.

"And if any one *should* happen to be at Hare Hall," Beatrix persisted, "I expect they'd think it rather polite."

"Oh, dashed polite," said Maurice cheerfully, thereby earning his brother's deepest gratitude. "Have another cigar, Bill?"

"No, thank you," said Bill, and immediately had the feeling that Beatrix would attribute this refusal to his lovesick condition. He shot a quick glance at her, but she was deep in her sewing. After all, he hadn't told her anything really, had he? One mustn't let it get on one's nerves.

"Now I'm going to read aloud to you," Maurice announced.

"Not out of the *Autocar*, darling?" asked Beatrix anxiously.

"No, no. Of course not. I'm going on with that infernal book."

It would be, perhaps, unkind to disclose the actual title of the volume of reminiscences to which Maurice was referring. He had bought it at the beginning of the long vacation, and Beatrix, though she had never told him, had finished it in one evening. But whenever he was feeling particularly domestic, he would take it up and continue reading from it aloud, and she appreciated the spirit which lay behind this unpleasant habit so much, that she had never offered the faintest opposition. Besides, except when Maurice interrupted himself, which he was rather apt to do, to say that the author was a blanked idiot or a dashed liar, it was so very easy to go on with one's sewing and think about babies. And it was so very nice to have one's husband sitting there in the drawing-room, so blamelessly employed, and so good-looking, too, when he got angry with the book.

"Some ghastly fool——" Maurice began suddenly, and then checked himself. "Oh, no. I beg your pardon. I thought some one had lost the book-marker. I say, Bill, where are you going?"

"It's all right," said Bill apologetically. "I'm only going to get my pipe."

"Oh. All right."

One wonders if any of the other furnished houses in the neighbourhood could have presented a picture one half so innocent as this quiet interior during the following hour. The dutiful wife, the good-natured husband, and the thoughtful brother-in-law; what an attractive group, what an example to the bridge-players at the bungalow next door, what an encouragement to the author of the reminiscences!

And wasn't it lucky that in no possible circumstances could any of the three ever be called upon to say what that particular chapter was about? For the nearest that Maurice ever came to discovering that the book-marker had been moved—by Beatrix, quite accident-

ally, when showing the illustrations to Sylvia—was when he broke off to say :

“How this brute does repeat himself !”

6

The telephone call to London had been completed by half-past ten the following morning.

“What I can’t make out,” said Maurice, emerging from under the stairs with rather a red neck, “is whose head this instrument is supposed to fit. There’s a thing like an ear-trumpet in there, and you’re supposed to shout into one end and listen at the other, and all the time you have to squeeze a little bar in the handle. But when I’ve got the thing on my ear, the other end is nowhere near my mouth ; and when I’m speaking, the ear-bit is somewhere round the back of my collar. I think it must have been invented by the Siamese twins.”

“Are you going for your drive, darling ?” asked Beatrix, making no attempt to solve the problem of the telephone.

“Oh, yes. Rather. Come along, Bill. Put your pipe away. You can’t smoke in the garage.”

Bill obediently knocked out his half-finished morning smoke, and followed his brother to the shed at the side of the house.

“As Beatrix isn’t looking,” said Maurice, “I think we’ll wheel it out. I don’t want to do more damage to these doors than I can help.”

To carry out this manoeuvre meant, as Bill immediately discovered, that Maurice sat at the steering-wheel, while he went round to the back and pushed.

“Half a minute,” Maurice called over his shoulder a little later. “I forgot to take the brake off. That’s better.”

The car emerged into the open without further injury.

Maurice then filled the radiator until the water splashed over the top, and the tank until the petrol poured over the edge of the funnel. The blue haze in which the whole scene was enveloped as he started

the engine, seemed to indicate that he had been equally liberal with the oil at some very recent period.

"Now, then," he said. "You'll hold the maps and tell me which way to go. We start by Canterbury. By the way, have you got any money?"

"I've got two or three pounds," said Bill.

"Well, I've got a fiver, so we ought to be all right. Do you mind getting my coat out of the hall? The dirty one, I mean."

There could be no questioning the accuracy of this description, Bill thought, as he unhooked the garment from the row of pegs.

"Are you going off now?" asked Beatrix through the open door of the drawing-room.

"Yes," said Bill. "Is there anything we can get you in Canterbury?"

"You'll never get as far as that," said Beatrix calmly. "But you might send me a telegram if you're not coming back to-night. Have you got plenty of money?"

"Oh, yes," said Bill.

"Well, good luck. Tell Maurice not to come past the front door. It only makes me nervous."

"All right."

He returned to the odorous fog in the middle of which Maurice and the car were palpitating.

"Do you mind opening the gate?" Maurice shouted. "And perhaps you could shut it after me again?"

Bill was beginning to realise that his duties as passenger on this journey might be by no means light.

"Beatrix says you're to go out by the side gate," he shouted back.

"Oh, all right."

There was a horrible grinding noise, and the car shot out of the fog, through the side gate and across the road, where it stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"Just give the engine a swing. There's a good fellow," said Maurice.

"Will you promise me it's not in gear?" asked Bill cautiously.

"Well, it isn't now, anyway," answered Maurice to the accompaniment of further clanking sounds.

Bill started the engine again and took his seat by his brother.

"Well?" he asked presently.

"Very tricky reverse," muttered Maurice, straining and struggling with some obstinate piece of mechanism.

There was another agonising screech from the gear-box, and the car darted back again through the side gate and was brought to a standstill within a foot of the garage doors. However, this time the engine had survived the shock, and at his second exit Maurice succeeded in turning in the direction of Canterbury without further mishap. Bill unfolded the first of the maps and prepared to offer advice at any doubtful corners.

For once it seemed that Beatrix's forebodings were not to be fulfilled. The twelve miles to Canterbury were accomplished without accident, and almost without incident. Maurice had, it was true, an uncomfortable habit of driving always on the wrong side of the road except when he was going to pass another vehicle, and if the speedometer had not been broken it would have registered an unusually variable rate of progress, but on the whole Bill found his confidence growing. The weather was absolutely perfect, and the trail of azure smell which they left in their wake was a matter which could only affect other travellers.

But on the further side of Canterbury there can be no doubt that they took the wrong turning. A section of road under repair neutralised the benefit of the map by driving them into uncharted by-ways, and the local sign-posts seemed all to be in that state of repainting when the old lettering has been covered with a coat of white and the new lettering is still waiting for this coat to dry.

"Hullo," said Maurice suddenly. "This can't be Maidstone already. Let's ask that fellow where we are. I'll slow down and you can shout."

Bill did as he was requested.

"The man says it's Ashford," he reported.

"Ashford?" said Maurice, looking a little puzzled.
"I thought that was in Lancashire."

"Aren't you thinking of Ashton?" Bill suggested.

"Perhaps I am. Can you see it on the map?"

"Yes, here it is. We'd better go through it now. After that it looks like a good road again."

"What's the time?" asked Maurice.

"A quarter past twelve."

"On we go, then," said Maurice, and at these words the engine again stopped.

"Shall I get out?" asked Bill.

"Don't bother. The self-starter will probably work now she's hot."

But in the end, after sundry gasps and buzzings from under the bonnet, Bill had to do as he had offered.

At ten minutes to one they passed through Charing, and at a quarter to two they sighted Maidstone. Maurice, whose nerve seemed to have been affected by their experiences outside Ashford, had insisted on stopping to ask the way four times, and the last time from a pedlar, who had taken advantage of the encounter to sell them a broom made of feathers.

"Beatrix will probably find it jolly useful," he said.
"You might hold it for me. I'm afraid it will fall out of the dickey, if we put it there." And with this pennant flapping over Bill's shoulder, they had continued their journey.

At the Bell Hotel in Maidstone they got out and had lunch.

"I must ask Beatrix why she never gives me pickles," was Maurice's only comment on the food. "Don't let me forget."

"Perhaps we could send her a telegram about it?" Bill suggested.

"That's an idea," said Maurice. "But perhaps we'd better not. They telephone them up from the post office, and Ada mightn't understand."

At three o'clock, when they were preparing to get once more under way, it was discovered that one of the front tyres had mysteriously subsided, and it was

another half hour before they finally left the town. But from now on Bill was quite certain of the route, and at twenty minutes past four even Maurice admitted that he knew where he was.

"We'll have a look at the house first, and have tea afterwards," he said. "By Jove, how it all comes back to one. Do you suppose the people will let us go in, if we tell them we used to live there?"

"There wasn't a caretaker when I was down here in May," said Bill. He felt a strange reluctance to disclose his knowledge about the window over the porch.

"Well, hop out and open the gate," said Maurice. "I'll leave the car in the drive, and we'll see what we can."

Bill hopped out, taking the feather broom with him, and Maurice brought the car up to the front door and switched off the engine.

"Now, then," he said. "Come along."

Together they made their way round the house, peering in at any unshuttered windows, and Bill wondered again why he found it quite impossible to mention the secret entrance which he had used last time. "Of course," he told himself, "if anybody caught us inside when Lord Longwood was away, it might take a bit of explaining." Yet he knew that this wasn't the real reason.

"I must say," said Maurice, "that they've kept it all up jolly well. If Leslie's going to get married, she won't have to wait to get into it. Eh?"

If the feather-broom had been the battle-axe which Bill for a moment wished it was, this utterance of Maurice's would have been his last. But he pulled himself together.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I mean, no."

"Let's go into the kitchen-garden," suggested Maurice, leading the way.

They made the circuit of the old, red-brick walls, helping themselves to a few nuts on the way, and then, just as Bill was closing the green-painted door again, something soft was pressed into his leg.

"Good Lord!" he heard Maurice saying. "Where did that come from?"

And looking down, he saw Alfonso, the black spaniel, flapping his tail violently from side to side and breathing heavily at his ankles. Bill's ankles, I mean.

"Good old boy," said Maurice, whereat Alfonso uttered a muffled and husky growl. "I believe he knows you, Bill. Have you met him before?"

"Yes," said Bill, into whose mind this apparition had brought sudden and as yet indigestible ideas. "He's Leslie's dog. But I can't think what——"

A sound on the gravel path beyond the angle of the garden wall made him break off. "Look out, Maurice," he said sharply. "There's somebody coming."

"The law of trespass——" Maurice began, and then he too stopped. Round the corner had come Lord Longwood, his arm linked in that of his only daughter.

"Why, it's Bill!" said Leslie, and her voice went through Bill's soul like oxygen and champagne and Armistice Day all rolled into one. "And Maurice. What on earth are you two doing?"

"Eh?" said Lord Longwood, beginning to blink.

"We motored over from Sandwich," Bill explained. "I thought you were in Scotland."

"I thought you were in Paris," said Leslie. "Come back and have some tea." She disengaged her arm from her father's. "Papa, you haven't forgotten Bill and Maurice, have you?"

"Eh?" said Lord Longwood again. "No, no. Of course not. Of course not."

It wasn't so much that his welcome was cold, for he smiled pleasantly enough as he spoke. But, to Bill at any rate, he gave the impression that his old-remembered air of pre-occupation was no longer the affectation which it had been, but the real thing. He seemed an older and a much tired man. Perhaps the abandonment of the visit to Scotland had been due to illness. Only if this were so, it must have been very recent, or Leslie would surely have mentioned it in her last letter.

"Are you quite certain we won't be in the way?" Bill asked.

"Of course not," said Leslie. "Stop to dinner if you like. And, Bill, do you mind my asking? What exactly is the broom for?"

"We bought it for Beatrix," said Maurice. "But," he added generously, "I'll give it to you, if you'd like it."

"No, thanks most frightfully," said Leslie. "It was only curiosity that made me ask. Come along, Papa, we'll go back across the fields. You'd better take the car round to our yard," she added, turning to the brothers Fraser. "And then come straight through on to the terrace."

"Right you are," said Maurice. He didn't ask, as Bill feared he might be going to do, to be let into the White House. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten all about it, for he drove off again without once looking back. And getting down to fasten the gate behind them, Bill had his last look at it by himself.

"I say," said Maurice, as the car moved off again, "it's lucky Beatrix isn't here."

Bill had been ungallant enough to have the same thought, but Maurice's reason couldn't be the same as his.

"Why?" he asked.

"I should have got in the devil of a row for wearing this old coat," Maurice explained. "We'd better not tell her I had it on."

"All right," said Bill; but he was thinking: "Why have I known all day that I was going to meet her? Can one really feel people's presence all those miles away? Why did she happen to be in the garden of the White House just at that moment? Somebody, or something, must have *meant* this to happen. I wish to God I knew why."

And as they turned into the gates of Hare Hall, he added to himself:

"Beatrix was quite right. It *was* silly to run away. But what am I going to do, what *can* I do, now that I'm back again?"

"By Jove!" shouted Maurice. "Look at those

hard courts. I wish we'd brought our racquets. I'd have shown you all something. I wonder if we could get a wash anywhere?"

They left the car in the deserted stable-yard, and made their way back again to the front door. The butler was standing in the hall and seemed to have been warned of their arrival, and with his assistance some of the dirt which they had acquired in changing the tyre at Maidstone was removed.

"How did you think the old man was looking?" asked Maurice in a hoarse whisper, as they went through towards the garden door. "If you ask me, he's breaking up."

"Look out, you idiot," said Bill hastily, for Lord Longwood could be seen standing just outside.

They had tea by the corner of the Pergola; a rich, country-house tea, to which both the brothers Fraser did more than justice. Lord Longwood confined himself to a cigar, and seemed in a more than usually inattentive mood; always coming in at the tail-end of any conversation and having to have things repeated to him. Leslie seemed to be watching him rather anxiously, and there was a little scene between them because he wouldn't eat anything. Maurice was full of boastfulness at having covered the best part of sixty miles without a serious mishap, and dragged the talk round to motors and motoring as often as there seemed any prospect of its turning elsewhere.

"Beatrix will be as sick as anything that she didn't come with us," he said cheerfully.

"You will both stay to dinner, won't you?" said Leslie, as tea was at last being cleared away. "You can get back in a couple of hours easily, if you go the right way."

Bill would have accepted like a shot, but it was Maurice's car and Maurice's day out, and Maurice it was who answered:

"It's awfully good of you. But I swore I'd get back to dinner if I could. Perhaps we could come over again some other time?"

"Yes, do," said Leslie. But what use was this to Bill, whose holiday would be over in two more days?

"I wonder," said Lord Longwood, addressing Maurice suddenly, "if you could spare a minute or two to come and look at something in my study?"

"Oh, Papa, you know you promised not to think about business to-day," Leslie broke in. "Can't you wait until Mr. Harvey comes back?"

Bill looked at her quickly, and, catching her eye, looked away again.

"I'm sorry, my dear," said Lord Longwood, "but I want Maurice's opinion on something. If he can let me have it, it may save me going up to London."

"Oh, rather. Of course," said Maurice, with complete disregard of professional etiquette. "Anything in the legal line, and I'm your man."

Leslie lifted her hand in a last, anxious protest, but Lord Longwood was already moving towards the house, and Maurice had risen to follow him. She let it fall back on her lap again.

"Bill," she said, as the others finally disappeared. "Tell me. What do you think about Papa?"

"Do you mean how do I think he's looking?"

Leslie nodded.

"I'm afraid he doesn't look as well as he did in the Spring," said Bill guardedly.

Leslie turned a face to him, which for the moment seemed almost haggard.

"It doesn't suit him," she said. "All this extra worry and responsibility. I had everything planned to get him a good holiday in Scotland, but at the last moment he let me down. He's not got the strength to do all that he's been doing."

"These committees, you mean?"

"Oh, the committees are only a little bit of it. It's all the other things. He simply *won't* let himself rest."

"But can't other people—I mean, couldn't Harvey . . . ?"

"Harvey?" Leslie repeated. "No, don't you see, it's Mr. Harvey who's made him take all this work on.

And he's working ten times as hard as Papa all the time. Only——" She stopped, and then suddenly stood up. "Let's go a little way up the hill," she added.

Bill rose to his feet, and they began moving towards the path which led to the highest part of the garden. For perhaps three or four minutes they walked in silence. And then :

"But, look here, Leslie," he said ; "if you're really anxious about your father, can't you make Harvey drop some of these things ?"

"I've tried," said Leslie.

"And you mean to say—— ?" The idea of any one daring to refuse her requests seemed to Bill inconceivable.

Leslie shook her head.

"He's a very unusual kind of man, Bill," she said. "Why," she added, "you ought to know that. It was you who sent him here."

"But, Leslie, I didn't send him here to worry you—or your father," he added quickly. "If I'd thought that was going to happen, I'd never have——Look here," he went on suddenly, "I'm going to tell you something about him. I dare say I ought to have said it before, but it was only a kind of suspicion, and when once Lord Longwood had taken him on, it seemed——well, it seemed so out of the question to come along with what one couldn't prove. And it might have been so unfair, if he was really helping your father."

"I suppose you mean about Colonel Baxter ?" asked Leslie quietly.

"What ? Good Lord ! you don't mean to say—— ?"

"My dear Bill, he boasts about it. He's shown us all the newspaper cuttings. But what difference does that make ? I can't tell people that my father is being run by his own private secretary ; and if Papa won't get rid of him, what can be done ? Besides, you don't understand it all even yet. Mr. Harvey really likes us. He won't touch a penny of all the extra money that he's made for Papa already. He's not impertinent, or unkind, or inconsiderate, or——"

"But he called you 'Leslie,'" Bill broke in, before he could stop himself.

"Who told you that?"

"Wog Lorden, when I met her in Paris."

"Then Wog's a liar," said Leslie incisively, and immediately added: "No, she isn't, Bill. I oughtn't to have said that. But—oh, I can't explain. You'd think me such a fool. Bill, are you going back to Paris again?"

"No. George is going out instead."

"And how much more holiday have you got?"

"I have to go back the day after to-morrow," said Bill, puzzled by the new drift of her questions, and still angry with himself for his unforgivable interruption.

"Let's sit down," said Leslie; and they sat on the wooden bench from which one had the view all over the Hare Hall estate, and could now see the sun sparkling in the distant windows of the White House.

"Bill, why did you go to Paris?"

She wasn't looking at him as she asked this question. If only she had been, what, he wondered too late, might he not have answered?

"I told you," he said. "George and I bought a business out there, and one of us had to stay and run it."

"You never told me at that dance," said Leslie, still staring at the view.

"But nothing was settled then," Bill tried to explain.

"And you'll be going back again later on?"

"Yes, in the Spring."

"You wouldn't rather stay?"

Bill gripped the edge of the seat to steady himself.

"It isn't a question of what I'd like," he said, with an attempt at laughter. "It's my job."

"Yes," said Leslie.

There was a little pause.

"You don't look awfully happy, Bill," she began presently. "Would you tell me, if there were anything wrong?"

Alternative answers hung poised on a knife-edge for the space of perhaps a second. One made up of words,

and the other the simplest but the most impossible action. Yet impossible only because of those horrible Rules. Before he realised it, the words had won.

"I always look miserable," he said, with a lightness which amazed him even as he spoke. "It doesn't mean anything at all."

"Oh," said Leslie, and somehow or other they had got up, and were moving down the grass path again.

"I expect Maurice will be waiting for you," she said presently.

"Oh, yes," answered Bill, with black misery in his heart. "I expect he will."

And as a matter of fact Lord Longwood and his temporary legal adviser came out on the terrace just as the others reached it.

"Hullo," said Maurice. "I think we ought to be getting along. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Bill; and as he spoke he was suddenly conscious that Leslie was slipping into the house behind his back.

"Well, thanks ever so much for the tea," said Maurice, turning to his host. "Don't you bother to come with us. We'll find our way out all right."

"You'll have a cigar?" suggested Lord Longwood.

"No, thanks very much. I can't keep 'em out of my eyes, when I'm driving."

"Bill? A cigar?"

"No, thanks awfully."

"Where's Leslie?" asked Maurice.

"I think she went indoors," said Bill.

Lord Longwood raised his voice.

"Leslie!" he called.

"Oh, don't bother," said Maurice. "She's probably in the hall. We'll say good-bye as we go through."

They shook hands with Lord Longwood and entered the house.

But Leslie wasn't in the hall. Nor was she in the yard, as Bill had still a faint hope that she might be. Maurice cranked up the engine and took his seat.

"Coming, Bill?" he asked. "Got the broom?"

Bill joined him in silence, and with the customary

grinding and groaning the car began to move. They went down the drive without passing the front door, and picked up speed in the lane outside.

"We ought to be back by eight," said Maurice.

"Oh, yes. I should think so."

"I say," Maurice went on. "I really think old Longwood is cracking up, or something. He got me into his room and fished out a lot of papers, and then whenever I began asking him what he wanted, he started talking about something else. Jumping about all the time. Asking questions and not listening to the answers. Finally he put all the papers away and thanked me very much, and we came out again. I felt rather an ass."

"Do you mean he didn't really ask your advice at all?"

"No," said Maurice. "He seemed to want to, but he kept on funking it. Dashed funny."

They drove without speaking for a couple of hundred yards, and then, just as they were spurting up the little rise into the main road so as to avoid changing speed, a two-seater appeared without warning round the corner. If Maurice hadn't, as usual, been on the wrong side of the road, he must have met it practically end on. As it was, he clapped on the brakes and skidded to a standstill, with his back wheels on the edge of the ditch.

"Look out, sir," he shouted angrily. "Why the devil didn't you sound your horn?"

The other driver had slowed down and was looking back over his shoulder.

"Sorry," he shouted, and then his eye lit on Bill.

"Hullo," he called. "Back again? Sorry I can't wait." And with these words he let in his clutch and sped away down the hill.

"What the dickens did he mean by that?" asked Maurice, staring after the retreating two-seater. "Did you know him?"

"Yes," said Bill. "That's Lord Longwood's secretary. You know, the one that wrote to you."

"Is it, though? I hope he breaks his dashed neck," said Maurice with some heat.

"He might do worse," said Bill, still gazing down the empty road. "Shall I start her up again?"

"Oh, thanks, old chap. If you wouldn't mind."

They were on the top of the big hill beyond Maidstone before either of them spoke again, and then Maurice suddenly asked :

"By the way, what was Leslie talking to you about ? "

"Oh, nothing," said Bill. "Just anything."

"Funny her not saying good-bye," said Maurice.

Bill pretended he hadn't heard.

"I say it was funny she never said good-bye," repeated Maurice loudly.

Bill's self-control snapped.

"Oh, *damned* funny," he shouted.

This, I suppose, is where the chapter should really end ; leaving it to the reader's imagination to fill in Maurice's surprised enquiry and Bill's hasty apology, which he realised, even as he uttered it, would be used as evidence against him by Beatrix, however little it might suggest to her husband. But with night coming on fast, it hardly seems fair to leave these unskilful motorists on the top of a windy upland in the middle of Kent, with more than twenty-five miles still separating them from home. An epilogue or postscript is therefore added setting forth how, switching on the engine again after coasting down the hill into Canterbury (a practice for which the School of Motoring disclaims all responsibility), Maurice had the unusual and unfortunate experience of blowing the silencer right off the end of the exhaust in one almighty explosion. And how, with a noise like a battery of maxim guns, they struggled to the nearest garage—not, unhappily, without yielding their names and addresses to a policeman on the way, and from this haven of refuge returned at length in a Ford taxi, reaching Sandwich at twenty minutes past nine.

Beatrix's comment, when they had finished the story of their wanderings, is also, perhaps, worth recording.

"Well," she said, addressing her brother-in-law, "I think you might have taken more care of him."

VI

BILL v. FATE

1

BILL spent two or three nights at the Corinthian Club while George was packing up and taking himself off, and while Mrs. Whalley was indulging in an out-of-season spring cleaning, and then he returned once more to his old quarters and to something approximating very closely to his old existence; five and a half days in Pardon Court, and one and a half waiting for Monday morning to come round again. So as not to disturb M. Thibaud, he transferred himself to George's desk at the office, but this was almost the greatest change in his daily life; since invoices and bills of lading and consignment notes continue to resemble each other pretty closely whether they refer to Finland or to France.

The establishment at Sandwich moved back to Kensington at the beginning of October, and the weekly dinners at Maurice's house entered on a fresh season. But Maurice in term time was a very different being from Maurice on his holiday, and he was working himself up into a state of nerves about Beatrix's baby which had the effect of making him very argumentative about Ireland. With every wish in the world to agree with whatever view his brother chose to adopt, Bill found it hard work keeping pace with the weekly changes which were flung at him across the dining-room table, and more than once he saw himself involved in an aimless wrangle on some point about which he knew nothing and cared still less. For Bill's own nerves were not always during this period as reliable as might have been wished.

And Sylvia had started a nursery-governess, who had, to everybody's annoyance, begun her fell work by deny-

ing the existence of Father Christmas. Bill found himself called upon to compete with an unseen rival, who was slowly but surely undermining his niece's belief in that extravagant autobiography. Sylvia was as affectionate and adorable as ever, but it was a bit too much when she took him to the nursery window and expected to be told the names of the stars. Bill only knew the Great Bear, and the beastly thing didn't seem to be there at all that night.

"Miss Vickers says there isn't a man in the moon," Sylvia had told him kindly.

There were stray nights with friends at the Corinthian, and stray Saturday afternoons in the billiard room, but for the most part when he wasn't at his office, he was sitting alone in his attic at Regency House, looking into the fire, and wondering occasionally what he would be feeling like now if he had been killed in the war. Somehow or other the vision of the white-haired millionaire which had helped him through many of his worst moments in Paris had, since his further meeting with Leslie, lost its effect.

Or sometimes he would go out for long walks after dinner, starting generally with the idea that he was going to a theatre, yet unconsciously making for the darker streets, and finally returning dejected and exhausted to his cold grate. The Thames Embankment saw much of Bill Fraser during this time.

There was another nuisance, also, about being back in London. Rules or no Rules, the fact had to be faced that he no longer had the excuse for writing to Leslie which had been given him by his residence abroad. One couldn't concoct news about London for some one who was living only twenty-five miles outside it; and if one didn't do this, what else was there left to do? When she came back again, he could, if he thought he was up to it, go and call at Brook Street, but his night wanderings had told him that the house was still shut up, and for all he knew they might be away until after Christmas. Lots of people were.

And Beatrix was so infernally kind. He was fond

of Beatrix, and particularly fond of her and sorry for her when she was just going to have a baby ; but he always had the uncomfortable feeling, whenever he saw her, that she believed she was reading his thoughts. Heaven knew what account of that afternoon visit to Hare Hall she had extracted from Maurice, or with what feminine deductions she had embellished it, but she had left off talking to him about either marriage or Leslie. And this tactful silence now made him long, with a perversity which can perhaps be understood, to return to these subjects himself. But never quite enough to take the first step.

"Dear Leslie," he wrote, as perhaps the hundredth variant on ninety-nine unposted letters, *"I hope you won't think me an idiot, but I had a kind of feeling that day at Hare Hall that I must have said something to annoy you, and if I did, I do wish that you would either tell me what it was or else say that you have forgotten. I expect it was only my rotten imagination, or perhaps it was because you were worried about your father and his health, only not seeing you again to say good-bye made it difficult to be sure. I am afraid perhaps you thought me unsympathetic or unhelpful, only it is all so difficult to explain. But you ought to know——"*

What was it that she ought to know ? He stopped and re-read what he had written from the beginning.

"No," he muttered. "That won't do either. One can't say it in a letter. She'd only think I was trying to interfere." And he tore the sheet of paper into sixty-four fragments and dropped them into the fire.

"I believe it would have been better to go back to Paris," he thought. "At any rate I could overwork there."

George's letters certainly indicated no diminution in the volume of their French business. He was already talking about what they should do after next spring, when they should easily be able to raise the money to buy out Mr. Girling's nominee. Not, as he admitted,

that he didn't like old Pilbrow or didn't appreciate what he had done for them; but the fact remained that he was only part of a general loan, and if they could pay the rest of it off, there was no point in going on paying interest to a sleeping partner. "*For that's what he's going to become,*" George wrote. "*He's only been here one night since the middle of September, and he told me then that he was so busy on other things that he didn't know when he would be back again. If we want to take another partner, I'm all for having some one like Barrett, who is going to be there and do some work.*"

But George's ideas were soaring above private partnerships now. He wanted to choose the right moment and amalgamate with some really big wholesale house, with directorships for Bill and himself. That, according to him, was the only game nowadays. It had been all very well to plug along by themselves when there was nothing else to be done, but he was over forty now, and if one didn't take one's opportunities then, one couldn't expect to have many more coming along. He added a sketch of two very fat men lolling in a motor-car about twice the length of a Rolls-Royce. "*This,*" he had written underneath it, "*is what we ought to be looking forward to now.*"

Bill smiled. It was so like the hard-working George always to keep this vision of corpulence and sloth flickering about five years ahead of him. Though the motor was perhaps a little longer this time, and the figures a shade more obese, this wasn't the first time that he had drawn this picture of his prophetic ideal. And it seemed hard to accept it as any more likely to be realised on this occasion than it had during the hopeless past. Unless the most amazing things happened, by the time they had discharged their debt to Osman Girling, they would be left with a bare margin of capital on which to face uncertain markets and a fluctuating exchange. But even if it were possible, even if the five years could be knocked down to three or two, ought one even to pretend that Leslie would not have been snapped up long before then? Or if she were not, was there

any real reason to suppose that she would want to marry an opulent Bill any more than she wanted to marry the present uncertainly-situated one? Knowing that nothing could be settled before the spring, and that he would be seeing George again much sooner than that, he contented himself in his reply with criticising the outline of the wheels in the prophetic sketch, which, as he pointed out, would in their present condition make riches a more than usually doubtful blessing.

Thus October drew to a close and November took its place. Whatever it might be like among the Kentish hills, in London fog penetrated the business man's thorax and wet stickiness lay in wait for his feet. Shops began to advertise in gothic characters, children began to sing carols in quiet streets, magazines produced double-numbers, newspapers printed callous photographs of turkeys, the Corinthian opened its annual Servants' Fund, bearded managers of slate-clubs bought razors, surveyors of Income-Tax awoke from their summer lethargy, Pantomime artists revisited their photographers, Winter Sports agencies circularised schoolmasters, mistletoe shares soared and lemon-squash shares slumped, gentlemen wrote to the Press from outlying portions of the provinces to say that the appearance (or non-appearance) of certain berries on a bush in their garden presaged the hardest (or the mildest) winter for forty years; and altogether there was a prevailing if delusive air that, if something wasn't done about it pretty quickly, Christmas would be here at any moment.

Even Bill, insensitive as he was to many of these phenomena, turned over a page of his diary one day and found a printed slip exhorting him to place his order immediately for next year's volume, and it was at this moment that the idea entered his head of buying a Christmas present for Leslie.

The first result of this determination was to direct his evening wanderings to the neighbourhood of Bond Street and Regent Street, in search of inspiration from

the windows of such shops as had not short-sightedly closed their shutters. Articles of personal adornment, to which his fancy naturally led him, were of course out of the question; it being a well-known fact that such gifts are only permissible after the way has been paved by (and suitable encouragement received in return for) less suggestive and, generally speaking, more perishable offerings. But one couldn't go out before the middle of November and buy flowers or chocolates with any hope that they would still be worth posting by the twenty-fourth of the following month. And once the idea had taken hold of him, he didn't want to wait. He wanted to get the thing settled; to have something in a drawer at the flat which would be definitely biding its time to go on to Leslie.

But the difficulties of the restrictions under which he was making his search were very considerable. No City shop, he was convinced, could contain anything good enough for his purpose; and his exploration of the area between Piccadilly and Oxford Street, carried on as it was between nine and ten o'clock at night, gave an undue advantage to the windows which happened to be opposite lamp-posts—not always necessarily the kind of windows that he wanted. A few large establishments, it is true, had followed the American practice of keeping their lights on after they were closed, but these had nothing to offer except sumptuously-dressed wax figures, sitting in garish drawing-rooms, or standing about uncomfortably on skis. For Bill's purpose they were useless.

One dimly illuminated corner shop came to attract him more and more. Everything in its windows was so unmistakably a Christmas present. There were super-dressing-cases, super-umbrellas, super-clocks, super-photograph-frames and super-articles to which it was impossible to give any definite name. The shop itself had clearly abandoned the attempt, and had ticketed them as "The Season's Novelties." And one night there suddenly appeared the super-opera-glasses. As soon as Bill's eye lit on these gorgeous toys, he

knew that the end of his search had come. Though he never used opera-glasses himself, he had noticed that almost all women did. And these ones had the kind of telescopic handle attached to them which looked so particularly expensive when used from a theatre box. There could be no doubt that this was exactly what he had been looking for. Something that Leslie could take about with her, that she would be holding in her hand, looking through with her lovely eyes; and yet something which in no way overstepped the forbidden line beyond which ordinary jewellery lay. Of course it was too much to hope that no one else would ever look through them. One could hardly make the gift conditional on their never being passed along a row of stalls. But whatever hands might subsequently desecrate them, the first two people to whose eyes they were raised should be himself and Leslie. Quite clearly, one would never find anything better than opera-glasses.

He spent an anxious morning at the office on the following day, fearing all the time that the little stock might be exhausted before he could get back to Bond Street, and at lunch time he forgot all about food and hurried on to an omnibus. What on earth should he do, if he were too late? He fought his way through the crowds on the pavements, skipping in and out of the gutter and avoiding by a miracle the leads of the numerous toy-dogs who were being taken out to look at the hat-shops. And then, at the crossing just before his final goal, he was held up while a procession of taxis entered the main stream. But by craning his neck, he could just see the window that he wanted. Thank heaven, the opera-glasses were still there.

Inside the big stationers' there was a solemn calm. A man in a frock-coat approached and gently inclined his head to one side, with an air of enquiry.

"Opera-glasses," said Bill, still panting for breath.

The man in the frock-coat began walking away, and Bill followed him. Across yards of thick carpet, down three steps, and finally into an electrically-lit cavern in

which another man was leaning over a glass counter, scribbling furiously in a ruled book.

"Opera-glasses," repeated the man in the frock-coat. And he picked up a little chair and put it back again in the same place, indicating by this action that if Bill had the courage, he might sit down.

"Opera-glasses?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Yes, please," said Bill.

The man turned and opened a drawer behind him.

"This sort of article?" he enquired, placing a squat, black object on the top of the counter.

Bill had forgotten for the moment that they might keep other kinds.

"No, I mean those bright-looking ones with handles," he said. "Like the ones in the window."

"Oh," said the assistant. "For a lady, you mean?"

Bill didn't say, "What the devil has that got to do with you?" but it is probable that he looked it. The assistant, however, had again turned his back.

"This is the article you mean," he said, coming round again. And before Bill could stop him, he had pulled out the expanding handle and had raised the glasses to his own, horrible, spectacled eyes.

"Yes, yes," said Bill hastily. He almost snatched them away.

"We're selling a lot of these this Christmas," said the assistant foolishly.

"Oh," said Bill. Did this mean that Leslie would be getting six other pairs as well? However, he hadn't the nerve to retreat.

"I'll have these," he said.

The assistant scrutinised a small ticket which was affixed to the glasses. In its efforts to keep secret from its customers the prices of its goods, the shop seemed to have fallen back on a cypher which was all but unintelligible to its own staff. Bill's spirits rose. The man must have been lying when he said he had sold such a lot.

Meanwhile the assistant had brought the ticket, and consequently the glasses, to within an inch of his nose. Bill's fingers itched to protect his purchase from this

intolerable treatment, but with a great effort he restrained himself. The assistant seemed to have come to a decision.

"These are twelve guineas," he announced.

Dash it! he hadn't thought they could possibly be more than five, even in Bond Street. Not that Bill would have grudged his last farthing on this gift, but wasn't twelve guineas a bit too much like coming out in the open with Leslie?

But he had forgotten. Of course Leslie wouldn't know the price. She probably wouldn't even think of it.

"All right," he said. "Is there a case or anything?"

"There's a bag," said the assistant.

He produced the bag.

"Lined with silk," he added. And he put his beastly hand into it and began turning it inside out. This time Bill really did pull it away from him.

"Yes, yes. I see," he said.

And, strange to say, this rough action and impatient speech had the effect of making the assistant address him for the first and last time as "sir."

"Perhaps you would like something engraved on the glasses, sir," he suggested.

Bill considered for a moment. But though he wanted to give a good present, it wouldn't do to underline it too much.

"No, thanks," he said finally.

"Account?" asked the assistant.

"No," said Bill. "I'll pay for them now. And take them with me," he added as an afterthought.

He began feeling for his cheque-book, but the assistant had anticipated this need by pushing a pad of blank cheques across the counter at him. He even handed him his own fountain-pen, and then stood ready with a piece of blotting-paper.

"*Alexander Fraser*," Bill wrote, and added his usual flourish.

"Thanks," said the assistant. And taking up the

cheque, the opera-glasses, the bag and his original account-book, he disappeared.

"Jolly convenient idea, those cheques," said Bill to himself. "Saved me twopence, what's more." Business man as he supposedly was, it didn't occur to him to wonder what fraction of the shop's profit that twopence represented. Very few of its customers ever did.

About four minutes later he became aware that a discussion was proceeding in the background between the man in the frock-coat and the assistant who had served him, and that this conversation was being punctuated by furtive glances in his direction. What on earth were they talking about? Why weren't they packing up his parcel?

Suddenly the assistant broke loose and came towards him.

He offered some kind of observation, but his articulation was very imperfect.

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"Could I have your address?" repeated the assistant.

"My address? But I don't want you to send anything."

"That's right," the assistant agreed. "But we make it a rule when customers pay by cheque."

"Oh, do you?" thought Bill. Then why hadn't they said so before, when he was writing it? Why had they stood there pricing his clothes and arguing about his possible solvency? Rule, indeed! He was overwhelmed with a desire to fling out of the shop in a dignified and paralysing fury. If he could in the heat of the moment have called to mind the name of a single one of their rivals, he would certainly have done so. But to leave without planting this poisoned dart would clearly be to admit defeat. And besides, how did one stop a cheque when one didn't know the number?

"Twenty-two, Regency House," he said coldly.

"Thanks," answered the assistant, and again departed.

Ignorant as he must be of the vast distinction between Number Twenty-two and any of the numbers below

twenty, he was obviously impressed, and Bill enjoyed a brief sensation of victory. But it was a hollow triumph at the best. It should be oneself and not one's address that should suggest the ability to meet cheques for twelve guineas. He suddenly remembered Messrs. Ibbs and Willingham. That fellow Harvey wouldn't have tolerated anything of this sort. He would have been more likely to take the goods away without paying for them at all. Bill's thoughts remained in puzzled contemplation of the difference between Harvey and himself until his parcel was eventually brought to him, and as he had come to find of late, once the subject of Harvey had got into his head, it stayed there.

All afternoon he kept wondering what the trio at Hare Hall were doing. What could Leslie have meant that day when she had said that he would think her such a fool? Why should Harvey have been driving back in such a hurry that he couldn't even wait to speak to two people (one of whom, moreover, he knew) whose lives he had as nearly as possible cut short? What was it that Lord Longwood had wanted to ask Maurice, and why hadn't he asked it?

When he got home that night he unpacked the opera-glasses with the utmost possible care, untying every knot in the string, and slowly unrolling the tissue paper in which they were wrapped. His little sitting-room was too small for any satisfactory test to be made of their magnifying power, but he pulled the handle in and out several times and adjusted the focus for imaginary views from different parts of a theatre; and then he sat down at his writing-table and taking out one of his cards, wrote on it, "*With best wishes for Christmas.*"

After a considerable period of rumination, he crossed out the engraved "Alexander," and substituted "Bill," and then, carefully as before, he replaced the tissue paper and the cardboard box and the brown paper and the string, and having done this, he locked the whole parcel away in a drawer, and sat gazing into the fire.

2

The next morning the fog had returned. From the top floor of Regency House nothing could be seen except yellowish vacancy, and from the street below came distant shouts and muffled bumps as the traffic took itself on and off the curb.

Bill had his breakfast by electric light, and his newspaper still hadn't arrived when he left. He reached the Underground station to find the crowd waiting four and five deep all along the edge of the platform, but in this weather there was no other possible means of reaching the City, and he took his place in the coughing and dripping mass. Train after train came in, packed apparently to the roof, but the station officials continued to shout encouragement to the waiting passengers, and gradually yet just perceptibly their ranks began to thin. Every time that a train drew away into the tunnel, it seemed impossible that the line should not be found sprinkled with mangled and electrocuted corpses, forced through the further side of the carriages by the pressure from the platform, but every time a miracle seemed to have intervened to prevent this. And at each fresh battle, the uniformed hustlers began again their inspiring yells: "Pass right up the cars, please. Plenty of room further up the cars."

Followers of the science of auto-suggestion will realise that it was the passengers who should really have been uttering these cries, but even as it was they were having their effect, and the moment at length arrived when Bill also was crushed suddenly through a doorway and carried away. For fifteen minutes he stood with his chin on the brim of a stranger's hat, unable to move hand or foot; but at the Mansion House the pressure was considerably eased, and the blood was once more beginning to move through his system by the time he reached his own station.

Where the fog had before been yellow it was now black, and a slow rain of mammoth smuts was descending from above. But in the City every one hurries, whether they can see where they are going or not, and

in a few minutes Bill had reached the entrance to Pardon Court. He looked into M. Thibaud's room, but M. Thibaud had lodgings somewhere in South London, and might be anywhere in this kind of weather. He certainly wasn't at the office.

He sat down at his own desk and gathered his personal correspondence towards him. Two or three calendars there were—there had been two or three calendars every day for the last week—a circular from an insurance office, a sample of blotting-paper, and what looked like a real letter. Who was it who could be writing real letters to him at the office? He slit the envelope open and glanced at the signature. "*Wog L.*" No address at the beginning and no date. What did Wog L. want to write to him about? Hullo! she was engaged. How nice of her to write and tell him.

"*Dear Bill,*" wrote Wog, "*I want you to be one of the first people to know that I'm going to marry Frank—you know, the one you met in Paris—because I've always felt rather a brute for turning you out that evening and never telling you why—only I expect perhaps you guessed but possibly you didn't.*"

Wog's general meaning was clearer than her construction. Bill took a deep breath, and went on.

"*. . . you didn't. I am most terribly happy about it. I never thought I could be happy again because you know I was engaged once before, and it isn't the same thing—it couldn't be that, but Frank understands everything so wonderfully and you mustn't think I'm not in love with him either but it is difficult to explain and sometimes I can't quite understand what has happened myself. Frank said afterwards that he liked you awfully—*" ("Did he?" murmured Bill.) "*—and we are going to be married in Jan or Feb so I do hope you will be there, because you really helped things a lot by dining with me at the Crillon that night though I expect you wonder how and I'm not going to say. It will be in the Times on Tuesday probably*

and we are going to be married in Jan or Feb—" ("You've said that once.") "—and isn't it awful we may have to go to India almost directly but I hope not but everybody can't be in the City.

"Now Bill I want to tell you something. This is something that I very nearly told you twice before but each time I thought better of it because although one does things with the very best intentions people don't always understand—at least that's what I've found. Only now I'm so happy I don't feel it could do any one any harm, and after all if you see people doing something pointless and think you can stop them, I don't see why you shouldn't. Do you remember my ringing you up at your office last spring about my sponge? It wasn't really my sponge, but I'd had a kind of row with Leslie, at least——"

At this point Bill's eye made a violent effort to take in the whole of the rest of the letter at one glance, but Wog's style and handwriting defeated it. He went back to where he had left off.

" . . . at least nobody could have a row with her really, but she said I was mad and I called her several names too. Do you remember that evening when she went to bed with a headache? It wasn't a headache really, it was rage with me, and the rage was all because of you, because she had said if ever she married anybody it would be somebody like you, and I said all right I'd tell you, and she said she'd never speak to me again, and then I suddenly knew she didn't mean somebody like you but just you yourself. And that was why I wanted you to give me lunch because I thought if you did perhaps you would confide in me and then I might have given you a hint. I jolly nearly told you again in Paris because one's only got to look at you when you said How's Leslie to know what's the matter with you, but I didn't, but now I have. And what I say is why should two people go on being stiff and proud just because one of them's got a lot of money? Anyway I've said it now and if you ever give me away then you won't deserve anything and I shan't care what happens to

you because I shall hate you. But money is all rot—I found that out long ago. When I was seventeen my father died, and they found he'd lost every bob in the world and I was passed about among my relations and they all thought Poor Girl and wanted me to be a governess—at least Frank didn't but all the others did, but Leslie had me to stay with her, and she made them all stop talking about governesses and we both did nursing instead and that was when I first met Alan who was killed. I don't seem to have explained about money properly, but what I mean is as long as people are nice it doesn't matter which of them has it, and though of course you're not a millionth part as nice as Leslie still you can make her happy if you want to, and I don't want to be the only one who's happy. So buck up Bill, and go ahead and when you're married perhaps you can sack Harvey and then we'll all have fearful fun together—that is if Frank doesn't have to go to India. You must burn this letter at once—I haven't even told Frank what I'm saying to you—and you mustn't ever mention it to me again because I expect I shall wish I hadn't posted it, only if everybody is going to go on being proud for ever one might as well be dead.

*"Yours ever,
"Wog L."*

For perhaps five minutes there was dead silence in the little room in Pardon Court, while the light from the lamp on the desk beat down on the pages of this letter, and the stillness was reflected again in the fog-darkened window. Then the reader suddenly laid it down, sat back in his chair, and remarked aloud :

"But of course that's all rot."

It was a lucky thing, wasn't it, thought Bill, that Wog should have let herself go like this to some one who knew how to keep their head. And looking down, he suddenly saw that his hand was trembling like a vibromassage machine. "I wonder why it's doing that," he thought. "I'm perfectly calm, really. I know that girl means well, but of course I don't believe her. I

mean to say, it's absurd. I mean . . . Besides, it's all very well," he concluded lamely and unintelligibly.

Yet look at it this way. Wouldn't it be better, after all, to ask and be kicked out of the house, than to hang about like this, doing nothing except buying opera-glasses? When everything was said and done, there was nothing intentionally offensive about asking some one to marry one. They mightn't want to do it; that was their affair, and of course they could jolly well please themselves; but that was no reason for getting annoyed about it. Cats, as was well known, could look at kings. And if people went about looking as lovely and being as attractive as all that, then they must expect to put up with slight inconveniences. One might put it like that. One might say that one was awfully sorry to be a nuisance, but one had stood as much as anyone could be expected to stand for nearly six months, and had really given very little trouble to anybody all that time, and that the point had just about come when one might as well let oneself rip. And then one jolly well *would* let oneself rip. And after that one could clear out and take to drink or do anything else that one chose, and nobody could blame one. Yes, Wog's letter, so he told himself, made no difference. No difference at all. The point was that it was six months since that first visit to Hare Hall, and six months was just about long enough.

Almost before he knew what he was doing he had reached his decision. He would write to Leslie and say would she lunch with him one day when she was up in London. There seemed no reasonable ground for imagining that she would refuse. And then, right at the end of lunch, so as not to risk cutting the whole thing short in the middle, he would let her have it. Meanwhile the only thing to do was to use all one's strength of mind to avoid thinking what would happen after that lunch. And since there suddenly seemed to be no time like the present, he would write that invitation at once.

He took a sheet of notepaper from the drawer of his

desk, glanced at his old friend the almanack for the date, and began.

"Dear Leslie," he wrote.

Some one was knocking at the door.

"Oh, come in," he shouted.

The boy made his appearance.

"There's a telegram for you, sir," he said. "The messenger says he's very sorry but it was delivered at Garden Court last night by mistake."

This wasn't the first time that the Post Office had played this trick, nor, Bill imagined, would it be the last.

"Oh, all right," he said.

He snatched at the envelope and ripped it open.

"Don't on any account read letter I have just written to you—Wog Lorden."

"Any answer, sir?" asked the boy.

"No. No answer," said Bill automatically, and the boy left the room.

Now what on earth did Wog mean by that? He hardly liked to ask himself whether he would have obeyed the prohibition if the telegram had arrived in time, but as it hadn't, what did it mean? Had something happened to make her change her mind about it all, or was it just the effect of the remorse which she had clearly anticipated in her last paragraph?

Or was there some hitch over her engagement? Had she chucked Frank, or had Frank chucked her?

The *Times* ought to throw light on the last question, anyhow, for to-day was Tuesday, and it was on Tuesday that Wog's undated letter had said that her announcement would appear.

He reached for the folded copy on the corner of his desk, remembering as he did so that owing to the fog he had so far missed the morning's news, and turned to the Court page. Yes, here we were. "Forthcoming Marriages." And the next moment horrible, paralysing nausea had seized him.

The column was headed :

“MR. A. W. HARVEY AND THE
HON. LESLIE GRAHAME.”

Bill's eyes followed the paragraph to the end, and still continued to read because he never told them to stop. “Mr. L. S. Crabbett and Miss D. Stuckley, Major W. E. Ryan and Miss Monfries, Mr. G. Hunstable and Miss Biddington-Woosley, Captain F. Carruthers, M.C., and Miss Lorden——”

So Wog was all right. She had only telegraphed because she had heard about Leslie.

He went up to the top, and began again. “The engagement is announced between Mr. Austin Wallace Harvey, only son of the late Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Harvey of Surbiton, and the Hon. Leslie, only child of——”

Damn it all ! he'd picked that brute out of the street when he'd only got twelve and sixpence in the world, and gone out of his way to get him this job. He'd done it all himself !

And this was what Leslie had meant that last afternoon that he had seen her.

But it was impossible. One of those well-dressed cads from the Stewarts' dance, if you like ; but not Austin Harvey. He must have bullied her into it. She couldn't—she couldn't feel like *that* towards him. There must be some other kind of explanation. Oh, why had he gone on waiting and waiting, when all the time that other fellow was there in the house, buying her gramophone records, running the whole place, and in the end—this ? If only Wog had written sooner, he didn't care whether she were telling the truth or not, but he'd have had a run for his money. Beatrix had said it was silly to run away, and Beatrix had been right. It was the damndest, silliest thing that anyone had ever done. His own, lovely Leslie engaged to some one else. Before he could stop himself, something seemed to be swelling up inside him and choking him.

"Here, steady on," he said out aloud. And at this moment M. Thibaud opened the door and came into the room.

Bill made a hasty, unconsidered movement to cover up the *Times*.

"Hullo," he said, in a hoarse, strange voice.

"Your sacred climate," remarked M. Thibaud.

"Since three hours I have been in the train."

"What? Oh, yes. There's a fog, isn't there?"

"A fog?" said M. Thibaud. "For example, there is a fog."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Bill. Why couldn't he go away?

"And only the boy is here," continued M. Thibaud.

"No one opens the letters."

"Oh, haven't they? I've only just come in myself, I'm afraid. I——"

A rending, overpowering sneeze interrupted the rest of his sentence.

"You have a cold?" asked M. Thibaud.

"I don't know," said Bill. And then, seizing at this excuse for his manner, he added: "Yes, I think perhaps I have."

"It is a bad cold," said M. Thibaud.

Bill sneezed again. Honestly, he hadn't meant to, but he couldn't stop it.

"Yes," he decided. "And I think, if you don't mind, now that you've turned up, I'll clear out." That was the only thing to do. To get away somewhere. To lose oneself, if possible, in this providential fog.

M. Thibaud stepped across the little room and examined his employer's face.

"You have the grippe," he announced.

"Very likely," said Bill. "I feel rotten. I—I think I'll go home. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Unless it is the grippe," added M. Thibaud.

"Well, if it is, I'll ring you up. I'm awfully sorry, but——"

"It is understood," said M. Thibaud. "It is nothing."

Bill sneezed for the third time.

"I shall be all right," he said. Perhaps he really had caught a cold. The Underground these days was enough to do in anybody.

M. Thibaud opened the door again.

"We must not both have the grippe," he said. "I shall expect you to telephone."

"All right." He didn't care if he had small-pox, as long as M. Thibaud cleared out.

"It is your sacred climate," said M. Thibaud again, and closed the door. His voice could be heard outside, attacking the guiltless boy for the non-arrival of the rest of the staff.

Bill swept the *Times* on to the floor and rose to his feet, and as he did so, he saw the beginning of his unfinished letter to Leslie. Perhaps, after all, he'd better get it over. It would have to be done sooner or later. He sat down again.

"I have just seen your announcement in the Times," he wrote, "and I send you my very best wishes for the future. One doesn't always see as much of people after they are married as one would like to do, but in any case I hope you are going to be most terribly happy and will always have everything that you can possibly want."

His pen hovered for a moment in the air, and then he suddenly added :

"I am sending you a little present down to Hare Hall, and I hope perhaps you will like it. I shall never forget _____,"

What was it that he would never forget? For a moment he was on the point of tearing up the whole letter, and then he saw a way of finishing it.

"I shall never forget what fun we used to have when you were staying with your grandfather, and I like to think that the White House will be being lived in again. Yours ever, Bill Fraser."

He found an envelope, addressed it and fastened it up.

"Yes," he murmured. "I'll have to undo the parcel again and change the card, and then I'll post it down this afternoon. Dash it, I believe I *have* got a cold." For as he rose to his feet for the second time, he suddenly found himself shivering.

"Anyhow I've got an infernal headache," he added. And putting on his hat and overcoat, and with his letter grasped firmly in his hand, he staggered out into the fog.

8

Whether the germ which had taken possession of Bill Fraser had begun its life in the Underground, or wherever else it may first have opened its eyes on this troubled world, there can be no doubt that M. Thibaud had made a very accurate shot at its identity. Bill had struggled through the rest of the day with a growing burden of aches and sneezes, had even found his way to the post office and sent off his parcel ; but after a night of endless and indescribable discomfort, Mrs. Whalley's first glance at him made her telephone for the doctor.

"There's a very unusual type of influenza going about this winter," the doctor had said—he and his colleagues had said this every November for the last twenty years. For one thing it was true, and for another, patients seemed to like hearing it—"and you've certainly got it."

"Oh," said Bill. "What have I got to do about it?"

"Stay in bed till your temperature comes down," said the doctor ; "and then we'll see."

"All right," said Bill feebly. "Thanks very much. Will my housekeeper catch it?"

"I'll send you in a nurse, if you like," said the doctor. But Mrs. Whalley wouldn't hear of a nurse, and somehow or other she never did catch it. Possibly her resistance had not been lowered by falling in love. For six days she came in and out with beef-tea and bread-and-milk, and sometimes the temperature went up and sometimes it started coming down ; but it was not until

the seventh morning that the patient extracted the thermometer from his heavily-bearded face and saw a gap of nearly half an inch below the red star which marked normal. It was borne in on him that, regrettable as it might from many points of view be, he was not going to die. Whether he were going to live seemed for the moment another question, and one thought at a time was quite enough for a brain which was floating about in the air over the bed to the accompaniment of an endless noise of rushing water. He turned over with some difficulty and rang the bell.

"Mrs. Whalley," he said, with a faint sound of pride in his voice, "I'm sub-normal."

"There!" said Mrs. Whalley. "Won't the doctor be pleased!"

Bill tried to picture the doctor's pleasure, but didn't feel quite up to it.

"Are there any letters?" he asked.

Mrs. Whalley looked a little alarmed. This talk of letters had run unceasingly through the night when she had had to telephone for the doctor again, and he had come and given Mr. Fraser an injection. Yet he didn't look delirious now.

"I'll go and see, sir," she said.

There had been letters of sorts most mornings, but this time it seemed that Mr. Fraser had got what he had been waiting for, for he gave a kind of gasp of relief as he saw what she had brought him. But he didn't open the letter. He only held it in his hand.

"I'll get your hot water, sir," said Mrs. Whalley.

Even after she had gone, he waited a moment with the envelope still unopened. If this were going to be the last letter that Leslie ever wrote to him, he didn't want to hurry over it. But presently he tore it open and began to read.

"*Dear Bill,*" Leslie had written, "*Thank you so very much for your wonderful present, the first and only one that I have had, and still more for your letter.*"

Then she had scratched something out. Scratched it out with such violence that it was impossible, even

by holding the paper up to the light, to guess what it had been.

"I often think too of what fun we used to have in the old days, before the war and everything else happened. But you mustn't let this change mean that you disappear again for all those years as you did last time. I'm not going to have that. You're going to come to the White House as often as ever you can. Leslie."

Bill let the letter fall on to the sheet.

"No, I'm not," he said. "No, I'm *not*. I'm *never* going back to the White House. I'll go back to Paris, if you like, or anywhere else in the world; but as for the White House, if you've got to know, the biggest mistake I ever made was in ever going back there at all."

He lay for a minute or two exhausted by the force of this untruthful outburst. And then some fresh thought seemed to strike him, for he picked up the letter and read it through again from end to end. He seemed to be searching for something.

"At any rate she's not like Wog," he muttered. "She's got the good taste not to keep on saying how happy she is. But, my God!" he added with fresh violence, "if she isn't happy, I'll go down there one day when I'm feeling better, and I'll—I'll murder that good-looking brute!"

And with the utterance of this resolve, the execution of which would so obviously secure the happiness of everybody concerned, he turned over on his side, and in three minutes was fast asleep.

The next day he got up for the first time, and performed the agonising operation of removing a week's growth of beard with a safety-razor; and in the afternoon he put on a dressing-gown and tottered into the sitting-room, where he sat in front of the fire, feeling and looking like an emaciated Guy Fawkes. This, he recalled, was the stage of convalescence at which influenza-victims were apt to drown themselves in their baths, throw-

themselves out of high windows, or put their heads in gas-cookers. He wondered where they got the energy from to do it. He would have liked to write and tell Wog that he hadn't read her letter and that he was so glad to have seen about her engagement in the *Times*, but this would have to wait. He felt about as capable of holding a pen as of lifting a sack of coals, and whenever Mrs. Whalley came into the room and asked him how he was feeling, he had the greatest difficulty in not bursting into tears.

About five o'clock M. Thibaud arrived at the flat and insisted on talking business for over half-an-hour, and then was only driven out by the appearance of Maurice.

"Hullo, old chap," Maurice greeted his brother. "I didn't come in before in case I caught something. But I hear you're all right again now."

"Yes," said Bill, weakly.

"Well, you don't look it," said Maurice, and Bill wished he had said No.

"I'll be all right in a day or two," he muttered, his eyes beginning to swim.

"Beatrix told me to bring you some grapes," Maurice went on, "but I'm afraid I forgot."

"It's awfully kind of you," said Bill. "How is Beatrix?"

"Well, we're all rather on the jump. We've had that nurse in the house for two days and nothing's happened yet. Sylvia's gone to her grandmother's."

"Oh, yes."

"I suppose you saw about Leslie Grahame?" Maurice continued. "Was that the fellow who nearly ran into us that day?"

"Yes," said Bill.

"Well, I should think a lot of fellows would be gnashing their teeth a bit," said Maurice. "I wonder what Lord Longwood thinks about it. Has the man got any money, do you know?"

"I don't know," said Bill. He wished he could see some way of changing the conversation, but his disease had left him powerless to do even as much as this.

"Beatrix has taken it into her head to be annoyed about it," Maurice resumed. "But that's just like Beatrix, bless her! I suppose she'd picked out somebody else for Leslie to marry. She's always doing that with everybody she knows." He laughed.

"Oh, yes," said Bill.

"You can think yourself very lucky she hasn't tried her hand on you," said Maurice. "Let me know when she begins, and I'll come to the rescue."

"Thanks."

"What you want," said Maurice with extreme heartiness, "is a jolly good week at the Métropole. I know what these bad colds are like, but even a weekend at Brighton would pull you up again."

"It wasn't a cold," protested Bill. "It was influenza."

"Oh, that's what everybody says," laughed Maurice.

"But it *was*," said Bill, wriggling feebly in his chair.

"All right, old chap. Call it anything you like, as long as it makes you happy."

Bill's voice died away in a tearful mutter.

"Well, look here," said Maurice, getting up; "I must dash off again. I'm awfully glad you're so much better. Are you sure there's nothing else I can do for you?"

"No, thanks awfully. That is, I mean, you'll let me know if—I mean, when—I mean, about Beatrix?"

"Oh, of course," said Maurice. "I'll ring you up. Well, buck up," he added, moving to the door. "You take my tip, and go off to Brighton, and you'll be all right in no time. I don't wonder you feel rotten, sitting indoors over the fire like this."

Bill forced a smile on to his pallid countenance.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said once more. "Thanks so much for coming. And give my love to Beatrix."

"Right you are," said Maurice, and he took himself off; leaving the sitting-room door ajar.

Bill shut his eyes, and wished for the hundredth time that day that he hadn't told Mrs. Whalley he would stay up for dinner. Mrs. Whalley was jolly good

to one as long as one had a temperature, but with the arrival of the first bottle of tonic, she always seemed to lose interest. That reminded him. Time for another dose.

He staggered to the table and mixed himself a bumper. Filthy stuff!

He wondered what would happen if he drank the whole bottle right off.

Nothing, probably.

Oh, Hell.

4

The following day he took a little gentle exercise round the sitting-room table, found himself able to focus his eyes on the newspapers, brought his diary up-to-date by writing, "*Ill in bed*" on seven pages, and "*Got up for first time*" on the eighth, and by the afternoon actually felt sufficiently interested in the world's future to ring up the doctor and ask if he might go out.

"If it's very fine and warm," said the doctor, "you may go out for half-an-hour to-morrow."

As it was now the middle of November, these conditions seemed unlikely to be fulfilled, but as the doctor had also told him to avoid all worry, Bill understood that medical science only dealt with realities within its own limited province. Unless it were actually snowing, therefore, he would go and have lunch at the Club. And on Monday he would go back to the office. And until Monday, he would try, if it could possibly be managed, not to think what he was going to do about things after that.

At six o'clock Mrs. Whalley brought him in an evening newspaper, and when he had read all about Ireland, and Key Industries, and the end of the flat-racing season, and an interview with London's Oldest Muffin-Man, and City Chatter, and Football Forecasts, he began on the advertisements. And thus it was that at about twenty-five minutes past six, he came on the following legend, which occupied a quarter of a column next to the list of closing prices.

PRELIMINARY ANNOUNCEMENT**BRITISH UNITED HOSIERY, LTD.**

(Registered Capital—£5,000,000.)

The prospectus will be issued to-morrow and will appear in the London and Provincial Press of an issue of £3,000,000 preference and ordinary shares in the above Company.

(NOTE : This preliminary announcement is NOT a prospectus.)

For the first time for over a week the word Influenza faded out of Bill's mind. Three million pounds ! There could be no mistake about it ; this meant a big thing. Was it conceivable—as would almost appear—that after all these years somebody had engineered the big amalgamation which everyone had declared to be impossible ? *United Hosiery*, it said. That certainly suggested it. Yet why hadn't Thibaud said anything when he had been here yesterday ? It seemed hardly believable that a rumour of some kind should not have reached him. But if it hadn't, it meant that the thing was being run by somebody who knew their business pretty well.

Yes, it must be an amalgamation. No new manufacturer or merchant was going to raise all that money in these hard times, and no old ones could possibly want it unless they were going to buy up their competitors' businesses. Who could it be at the bottom of it all ? Bill ran over in his mind the names of the big men in the hosiery world, but there wasn't one of them whom he could conceive as carrying such a thing through. Hadn't the history of the whole industry been competition ? England against Scotland, and the individuals in each country against each other ? If this announcement foreshadowed what he had assumed, some

new and unknown brain must have been working away behind the scenes for months; watching the markets, giving dinners, issuing and obtaining promises, issuing and disregarding threats, collecting proxies and making all the other thousand and one preparations for the moment when the public should be invited to come along and subscribe to their own exploitation. For though there might be price-cutting to start with, if such an amalgamation went through, the real end would be inevitable. And what about the foreign markets? What about the position of firms such as Fraser and Company? Where would they be, if the competition between the big manufacturers came to an end?

If only George were here to talk things over with. If only—— A sudden idea, which but for his state of health must surely have reached him before, came flashing into Bill's mind. Sir Donald Hammersmith! Sir Donald Hammersmith and Osman Girling behind him. What had these two mystery men been meddling with hosiery for, if not in preparation for some such scheme as this? Why, it bore Girling's mark all over it. The secrecy of the preliminary stages, the courage of choosing the moment when wages were falling and dividends were doubtful to come along with this colossal reconstruction; and then to fling it at the industry and the public and by the very suddenness of it all to bluff them into co-operating with him. Yes, but wait a minute. How did this idea link up with his own share in the thing? What had Peter Miller's and the Agence Lemaître to do with these plans? Forgetting all about the feebleness of his limbs, Bill rose from his chair and began tramping up and down the sitting-room. Every now and then he seemed to be on the verge of seeing light, but always at the last moment some fresh thought came which couldn't be made to fit in. Supposing George had been right, and the only explanation were to be found in Girling's wish to keep clear of crises until he was ready? Yes, but why bolster people up with his own money, if he were going to come along six months later and either buy them up or freeze them out? Why

not have let them alone to take their chance of sinking or swimming ?

He suddenly remembered something else. Wog's reference at that dinner at the Crillon to Lord Longwood's plan for "selling hosiery." Was Lord Longwood, or his infernal secretary rather, in this new thing as well ? If so, when had they come in ? Had Harvey known all the time that Frasers' had been saved from bankruptcy by that still incredible intervention from one of the financial gods ? Must he believe now, after all that he had gone through, that it had been Harvey's influence that had pulled them out of that fearful hole ? Payment, perhaps, for getting him that introduction to his present employer, who was also his present victim. This was the worst thought that had come yet. To have posed to Leslie like that as "lashing out" into fresh fields of commercial enterprise, when all the time he had been owing his very livelihood to Harvey ; even the money that had gone to pay for those accursed opera-glasses. No, he wouldn't believe it. He was letting his imagination run away once more. Weren't there at least fifty other possible explanations of that quarter-column advertisement, if only he had the strength to think them out ?

For strength of any description was what he suddenly no longer had. A minute before he had been striding up and down the room with a flush that might well have been mistaken for one of health, but now he found himself hurriedly clutching at the back of his arm-chair.

"By Jove," he murmured, as he sank into it over the side ; "mustn't forget. . . . Been very ill. . . . Silly ass. . . ."

He sat there, panting, for a few minutes.

"No, no," he said to himself, presently. "This sort of thing does no good. I'll see that prospectus in the morning, and then, if I think it's going to hit us in any way, I'll dash across and see old George." He gave a shadow of a smile. "That ought to be as good as cutting one's throat at Brighton, anyhow," he added.

By the time that Mrs. Whalley arrived to bump the

dinner-tray against the sitting-room door, there was nothing left to show the excitement into which that Preliminary Announcement (which was so emphatically not a prospectus) had temporarily thrown him. He gave up his mind to discussing with his housekeeper the particular theatre to which she and her daughter should be sent, as the customary reward for her recent labours in the sick-room. The dialogue drifted imperceptibly into a description by Mrs. Whalley of her daughter's friend, who had been gassed in France, but, in spite of this, wasn't steady.

"It's given him ideas," said Mrs. Whalley darkly.

"Ah, yes," said Bill, sagely and sympathetically. And he thought, "This is the only kind of conversation that I can ever look forward to now, I suppose. I wish I weren't so dashed steady myself."

After dinner he played Patience in his arm-chair until half-past nine, and then he went to bed.

And in the morning all thoughts of British United Hosiery had gone from his mind. It was only after he had finished breakfast, and was wondering if he yet felt quite up to a pipe, that he turned to the City page of his newspaper and, with the sight of the three-column advertisement, suddenly remembered his agitation of the night before.

"Ah!" he said. And then, "Oh!"

For the list of directors was headed with the name of the Right Honourable Lord Longwood, of Hare Hall, Little Matchings, Kent, as Chairman. And among the remaining six names, though they were all known to him as being connected in one way or another with the industry, he looked in vain for that of Sir Donald Hammersmith.

Then this was Harvey's doing, and Harvey's doing alone. The evidence might not be conclusive, but could there be any real doubt of it? And for a moment, in spite of himself, his admiration went out to the mind which could in six months have learnt and done enough to launch this gigantic scheme.

For the first paragraph of the abridged prospectus

left no question of the scale on which the thing had been planned. "The Company has been formed," it began, "to acquire a controlling interest in the following well-known firms, all manufacturers of high-class British hosiery goods." And there followed the names of no less than eight of the biggest businesses in the Midlands and Scotland, including Harraways' (Leicester) Limited, Brackett and Smith, Glendowrie Mills, Peter Miller and Sons, Ledburys', and the New Century Manufacturing Company; which last, as Bill well knew, had its own multiple shops in every town in the Kingdom. Below this paragraph came an inspiring record of comparative profits from the year 1913, ingeniously averaged into a heavily-leaded summary, and succeeded by a forest of foot-notes explaining away (chiefly by means of Excess Profits Duty) any individual lapses from the general picture of constantly-increasing prosperity. But it needed no figures to tell anyone in Bill's position that if these eight big firms had agreed to pool their interests and management, only super-human blundering could prevent the remaining manufacturers from either putting up their shutters or coming into the combine on any terms which might be offered to them. In one night, so far as the Public was concerned, a complete Hosiery Trust had been born.

Slowly and carefully he read the whole thing through from beginning to end, and nowhere did his intimate knowledge of the conditions in the industry show him a single real weakness or flaw. The subscription lists were to remain open for four days, but he had no doubt that the issue would have been over-subscribed in less than two. Why, dash it all, with proper management—and Harvey might be trusted to have seen to that—the thing would beat Pilbrow's silver mine hollow.

And where did Messrs. Fraser and Company come in? Was there going to be any room for the small agents when the new combine began screwing up its organisation? Could George and he convince these hard-faced directors—with Harvey sitting in the background—that the Agence Lemaître was still wanted; or would

the next thing be notices of termination of their agreements with everybody inside the ring, and the establishment of the ring's own wholesale house in Paris? If only old George were here.

Only if George wanted them to go on their hands and knees to the Chairman of United Hosiery, what then?

Well, whatever happened, he couldn't go on sitting here. Doctor or no doctor, he must see Thibaud this morning and then telegraph to George that he was crossing to-night. The only mistake he'd made was in not telegraphing as soon as he saw that preliminary notice in the *Evening Record*. Heaven alone knew what the end of it all was going to be, or what they could do that would have any effect on it, but they must act together; and——

There was a sudden sound of heavy footsteps in the passage outside, a concussion, as from the dropping of a heavy weight on the floor, and in at the sitting-room door walked George Lucas himself.

"George!" cried Bill. "What on earth——?"

"Are you all right?" George broke in. "Good Lord, what a fright you gave me! I thought you were pegging out, I——"

"You thought what?"

"When I got your telegram. I only just caught the train. I hoped at first that you were better and that it was business or something, but when I got to the office and Thibaud told me you were still away, I can tell you I—— But you *are* all right, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course I am, but——"

"Well, my dear old Bill, why didn't you say so?" George sank on to the sofa and began mopping his forehead. "You don't know the fright you've given me."

"But, look here. What do you mean about a telegram? I never sent you any telegram."

"You never——" George stopped, gasping for breath.

"No. I haven't sent you anything since I told you I was down with influenza."

"Then somebody's gone mad," said George, helplessly. "Just oblige me by looking at that."

He handed Bill a crumpled telegraph form, decorated with strips of gummed paper. And on the lowest of these was printed:

"Come at once if you possibly can. Bill."

"Now, then," said George. "Do you mean to tell me——"

"I most certainly and absolutely do," said Bill. "I haven't left this flat for over a week, I haven't sent a telegram to anybody on earth for over a month, and I've absolutely no more idea what this means or where it came from than the man in the moon. Is that clear?"

George grinned.

"That sounds pretty conclusive," he said. "Then who's made me an April fool in the middle of November?"

Bill shook his head. He still could hardly understand what had happened.

"Well, but look here," George went on. "It's no dashed joke, you know. It's knocked the stuffing out of five pounds coming over here, let alone that I'd made up my mind you were dying, and I'm jolly well going to get to the bottom of it. I say, are you *quite* sure——"

"Yes, of course I'm quite sure."

"But who could *want* me to come bundling over here?" George protested. And then, peering at his partner, "I say, how are you really, though?" he added.

"Oh, I'm all right. I only got up the day before yesterday. I was going out for the first time to-day."

"You look pretty ghastly," George admitted. "But, look here. About this telegram. What am I to do? Take it up with the Post Office? They'll never tell me anything. I've never known such a silly trick," he finished grumblingly.

"I'll see what I can make them do," said Bill. "But I must say, it beats me. Whoever wrote that message must have known a good deal about you and me. But

what did they want? Just to annoy us both, or—or to get you away from Paris?"

"But why should they? Barrett's still there. And Pilbrow turned up two days ago. They can't play any games with those two."

"Oh, Pilbrow's in Paris, is he?"

"You mean you thought it might have been from him?"

"Well, you'll admit that he's a possibility."

"But he can't send a telegram from London if he's in Paris," said George argumentatively. "Look there at the top of the message. Do you suppose I'd have come all this way, if that had been handed in in the next street?"

"No, I see. It can't have been Pilbrow."

"Of course it can't," said George. "Well, I suppose all I can do now is to go back again."

He rose to his feet as if he meant to carry this determination into effect at once.

"Here, wait a minute," said Bill. "I was just going to send you a telegram, when you came in."

"You were going to do what?" asked George, sitting suddenly down again. "Treat me gently, Bill. Remember I've been travelling all night."

"I know you have, George. And I think it was an infernal shame to worry you like that, and it was jolly good of you to think I was dying. But have you seen to-day's newspapers?"

"Only a picture paper in the train. Why?"

"Well, look at this, then," said Bill, and he handed him the three-column announcement of the new issue.

"What's this?" said George. "British United—Gosh! Who's pulled this off? Not Lord Longwood? Yes, it is. I say, Bill, our fortune's made."

"No, it isn't," said Bill.

"Yes, it is. He asked you down from Saturday to Monday. He'd do anything for you. Don't you remember my telling you to marry the daughter?"

"The daughter's going to marry somebody else," said Bill. "And—and I wish you'd shut up."

He turned quickly away and looked out of the window. Not that he saw or wished to see anything there, but he hadn't realised until he had said it out loud, quite what hell it was to talk about it. And so he missed the fleeting expressions of sympathy, remorse and self-condemnation which were passing rapidly over George's transparent face. When he turned round again, his partner was absorbed, apparently, in the details of the prospectus.

"Seriously, old chap," he said, looking up, "I'm glad I came over. But if somebody wanted to give me the tip, why did they put your name to the message?"

"You don't think it could have been Osman Girling, do you?" asked Bill.

"What, the fairy god-mother? That's an idea, isn't it? I say, Bill, I suppose you don't feel up to coming back to the City with me? No, of course you don't. But I think I ought to go and hustle round a bit and find out what I can about this. Do you mean to say this is the first you've heard of it?"

"Absolutely. Of course I've been stuck indoors for a week, but I've spoken to Thibaud practically every day, and I'm quite certain he'd heard nothing."

"That's the way to do it," said George admiringly. "Keep it all dark until you're ready. And then, Bang! let 'em have it. The fellow who put this through is the biggest man I've ever come across. Eh?"

"Yes," said Bill. "And look here, when you've finished hustling, come back and have lunch with me at the Club. We've got to talk about this."

"Right you are. I'll leave my bag here, if that's all right. About half-past one?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

"Au revoir, then," said the volatile George, leaping to his feet again. "I'll bet that was Girling, and he put your name because he couldn't bear to put his own. I wouldn't have been out of London to-day for anything. See you at lunch, then." And he was gone. Slam went the front door of the flat, and Bill was alone again.

But could it have been Mr. Girling who had sent that

telegram, and, if so, why had he done it? For the rest of the morning Bill sat in his arm-chair, alternately dreading he scarcely knew what, and hoping what he could hardly describe. And once every quarter of an hour he came round again to the same despairing thought. "What does it matter to me who makes his fortune or who loses it over this business? If it weren't for old George, I'd chuck the whole show, and get a job somewhere else. I've messed this thing up from the beginning to the end. I'm sick of it."

At one o'clock he roused himself and put on his hat and coat, and then, slowly and cautiously, made his way down to the street. He felt as he imagined that people of eighty or ninety must feel, but the devil of it was that he wasn't even thirty. He hadn't thought that day when he had realised it was his birthday that within less than a year he would have discovered and lost the only thing that made life worth living. Our poor bachelor! don't let us forget, when we see him facing existence with this craven spirit, that he had just arisen from one of the most debilitating diseases that afflict humanity. He isn't really a coward, even though he was drafted to Salonika, and had his leg broken instead of chasing Bulgars.

At twenty-five minutes after one he tottered into the Corinthian, and sank into a chair in the smoking-room; but it wasn't until nearly two that George arrived, and it was clear at once from his face that he had picked up nothing of any importance.

"I've seen old Thibaud," said George; "and I've stood in a queue at Harraways' office for forty minutes and given it up, and I've telephoned to half the people I know in London. Everybody's surprised, everybody says it's the biggest thing that's ever been done, but nobody has the faintest idea what the ring's policy is going to be. I've wired to Paris that I shall be stopping on here, and here I'm going to stay until I can find out how we stand. I don't see that I can do anything else. Do you?"

"No," said Bill. "Except have some lunch."

"What? Oh, yes, rather."

They moved through into the dining-room, found an empty table, and Bill gave his order. But as soon as this had been seen to, they returned inevitably to the subject of the new issue.

"I suppose," said Bill, "that they'll get the money subscribed all right. I wonder what would happen if they didn't."

"Oh, of course they will," said George. "Lord Longwood's name is quite enough for that. Besides, as it doesn't say it isn't underwritten, you can be quite certain that most of it is. After all, they'd never have got all those firms together if the money hadn't been there to be looked at."

"No, I suppose not."

"What's three million, after all?" asked George contemptuously. And he snapped his fingers, as if he were in the habit of handing out such sums to crossing-sweepers every day in his life. In fact the whole affair seemed to have induced in him a kind of financial intoxication, under the stimulus of which he began mapping out the lines on which the new directorate ought to proceed. By the time that lunch was half finished, he had taken in all the wholesale houses, signed agreements with the manufacturers in all other countries and run the price of hosiery well above the highest figures of 1919. Bill listened in envious admiration. What fun it must be to go through life with George's kind of outlook. To be able to work oneself up into these fevers of excitement purely over the prospect of other people becoming millionaires. He wondered if, when he had reached George's age, he would have got like this too. And from this his mind wandered away into a general consideration of himself and his surroundings in fifteen years from now. Sometimes, when the present is intolerable and the immediate future looks even worse, this is the only thing to do.

Meanwhile George was drawing a kind of genealogical tree on the table-cloth with a fork, gradually fetching in more and more branches of the textile industry, until

he had got very nearly the whole world organised as a vast machine for the manufacture and sale of its different products. In another minute he would obviously be getting on to the question of exports to Mars.

"It only wants a little imagination," he kept on saying. "And the people who started this combine have certainly got that."

"Well, I don't suppose they've got any more than you have," Bill suggested. "After all, you were saying just now that three million pounds was nothing."

"No more it is."

"Well, you're right in one way. This particular three millions means nothing to most people. That's what you don't seem to realise. Look at all these fellows here in the dining-room. They're not thumping the tables and drawing pictures with their forks, just because a set of sharks in the City are trying to borrow the price of a quarter of a battleship. Look at all those people mooning about in the streets. They don't look as if they care particularly."

"Oh, if you're going to talk political economy," George began, turning automatically to follow Bill's gaze through the dining-room window. But he left his conditional clause unfinished. In the street below them a newspaper motor-van had pulled up, and immediately from all directions a cluster of street-sellers had gathered round it, while the man beside the driver ladled out bundles of the latest edition. The two partners found themselves fascinated by the precision with which the whole undisciplined-looking gang was being given its supplies and sent running back to its posts. In less than a minute, it seemed, the little crowd was breaking up and the van was darting off again to its next assignation.

"There," said Bill. "Do you suppose those men are going to begin shouting about hosiery prices? Not a bit of it. Starting prices is all they care about. And

"Well, you're wrong," George broke in. "I can see the word 'Hosiery' on that fellow's placard now.

What does it say? I can't read the beastly thing."

Bill stood up and peered through the window. The seller had turned his back, and though he seemed to be shouting something, the heavy plate-glass cut off the sound of his voice.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll tell you when he turns round. Ah, here he comes. Good Lord, what's happened now? Look at that! Here, waiter! Ask one of the boys to get me the latest evening paper. Yes, the *Evening Record*. As quick as he can. Thanks."

"He knows I'm blind," said George plaintively. "and yet he won't tell me. Bill, my dear Bill, what did the placard say?"

"'Big Hosiery Failures,'" said Bill, still staring out of the window.

"What?"

"Yes. George, there's more going on over this thing than we've guessed. Why are they shouting that all over London to-day of all days? Some one on the *Evening Record* is trying to crab this issue."

"Oh, rot."

"Well, did you ever see a scare-line like that before? Who in this part of London gives a curse what businesses go smash?"

"Then it must be one of the firms who've been left out. That won't hurt the issue."

"It won't do it any good," said Bill. "Here he comes," he added. "Now we shall see."

"Sing it out," said George.

Bill had no need to hunt for the information. It was splashed all over the front page.

"'Grave Crisis in Big Industry,'" he read out. "'Failure of Two Great Hosiery Firms. Aftermath of Inflation. Effect on To-day's New Issue.'"

"Yes, but which are the firms, Bill?"

"'The *Evening Record* learns,'" Bill read on, "'that the well-known business of Peter Miller and Sons of Nottingham, who have been established as manufacturers of hosiery for nearly a hundred years, have sus-

pending business, and that application has been made to the Court for a receiving order to be made against them.' "

"Gosh," said George. "And those are the people that Girling wanted us to give our order to. Go on."

"Interviewed by our correspondent this morning, Mr. Ephraim Miller, the present managing director, declined to make any statement.' "

"That's a good interview. I'm sorry—go on."

"Messrs. Miller employ over three hundred hands, and considerable anxiety is expressed in Nottingham as to the prospects of work being found for these, since local unemployment is already severe. It should be noted that Messrs. Miller are one of the eight hosiery manufacturing firms in respect of which British United Hosiery Limited are issuing three million pounds' worth of shares for the purpose of forming a new combine. Opinion in the brokers' offices to-day is that this unexpected failure will seriously prejudice the prospects of this flotation.' "

Bill stopped and looked up.

"I should think it jolly well would," he said. "The *Evening Record* has seen to that."

"But what on earth could they be thinking of?" asked George. "Surely to goodness they must have known what was coming. Somebody's pulling their legs. It's a mistake."

"A pretty expensive mistake for the newspapers who've printed it," said Bill.

"And what's the other firm? Didn't it say there were two?"

"Oh, yes. Here we are. 'Hardly less disquieting for the future of this industry is the news which reaches us this morning from Paris of the failure of——' My God, George! It's us!"

"It's *what*?"

"They've gone off their heads. Look at that. The failure of the Agence Lemaître, an important house who have connections with practically all the big makers of these goods in the United Kingdom.' "

"Go on. Go on!"

"At the moment of writing it is impossible to say how widely this second failure will be reflected at home; but as it is learnt that the Agence Lemaitre acted exclusively for British houses, it is feared that there will be widespread losses in this country as well."

George banged the table with his hand.

"It's a plant," he shouted. "Wasn't I at the Rue d'Uzès till six o'clock last night? I'm going to see that infernal editor and wring his neck. If he doesn't print a denial by to-night, I'll kick him out of his own window. Bill, was *this* why somebody sent me that telegram?"

"Wait a minute, George. Leave the editor alone for one second. Even the *Record* wouldn't have printed that, if some one hadn't sent it the news. Now tell me this. If anybody *could* have smashed us at this stage, who would it be?"

"What? I don't follow."

"Who's got our bills for all the money we've raised since we started in Paris?"

"I know who's got 'em. But the damned things aren't due yet."

"None of them?"

"Only the first, and Pilbrow said he'd get it——" George broke off suddenly, and gaped at some unseen vision.

"But could we have met it?"

"Yes, of course we could, if we'd known we'd got to; but Pilbrow said——"

"He said he'd get it renewed?"

"Yes," said George, leaving his mouth wide open.

"Well, what if he didn't? What if *that* was why they wanted you out of the way?"

"But, Bill, Barrett's still there. He'd have known what to do. Besides," he added, but with diminishing conviction, "you can't go and bust people up between one evening and the next morning, without any kind of notice. Not even in France."

"If they're capable of forging a telegram," said Bill, "they've probably sandbagged Barrett by now. Heaven

only knows what's going on in Paris, but I'll tell you one thing. This message to the *Evening Record* came from our office."

"But who sent it?"

"Pilbrow."

"But, my dear Bill, why?"

"Because Osman Girling told him to. Isn't it obvious that the whole thing hangs together? Girling fetches you over with a faked message, and Pilbrow spreads the news that the agency has gone smash. Don't you waste your time on that editor. It's Girling we want to get after."

"But what's he done it for, Bill? I mean to say——"

"If you ask me, he's done it for the same reason that he's got this news on to the front page of the *Record*," said Bill, pointing to the crumpled newspaper where it lay between them. "He's done it because he wants to put a stop to this combine, and by Jove, I should think he's just about killed it."

"But if it's not true?" persisted George.

"It must be true about Millers', though how on earth he's managed to fix that, heaven alone knows. And as for us, if Pilbrow has murdered Barrett and told everybody in Paris that you've bolted to England, there's not much difference that I can see between that and the agency going bust. Remember what Girling said. That he always did as much as he promised, and no more. Well, he promised to lend us money, but he never said he wouldn't come along afterwards and ruin us. And now we can see what mugs we were to think he ever meant to do anything else. If you want my opinion about it, he's been waiting for this moment ever since that day that he first sent for me."

"All right, then," said George with a look of sudden determination. "But he needn't think he can get away with it. You can go and see him if you like, though I don't know what you're going to do when you get there. But I'm going back to Paris—now."

"You mean to-night?"

"No, I mean now. I'm going to fly." He got up

from the table as he spoke. "You'd better stand by at Pardon Court, if your influenza will let you. You've got to play Ephraim Miller's game until you hear from me. Tell anyone who asks that you've nothing to say. I'll try and get back as soon as I can. And if I catch Pilbrow there, and find that he's at the bottom of this ——" He left the threat unfinished, but it was none the less ominous for that.

"But, George——"

"It's the only thing to do," George broke in. "And whether you're right or wrong, it's the only thing the people who put this stuff in the *Record* don't expect. I'll leave my bag at your flat. Good-bye, old man. Don't you worry."

And with these last words, he was half-way towards the dining-room door.

"'Don't worry,' indeed," echoed Bill, staring after him. If it weren't for this infernal weakness, which even now was making his heart beat so that he could hardly hear himself think, did anyone suppose he'd have let George run off like that, with no further decision as to his own part in this appalling affair than the instruction to stand by and do nothing? Do nothing! Why, everybody in the City knew that Frasers' and Lemaître's were the same business. What would Thibaud be doing? He'd probably been ringing up the flat ever since the evening papers had come out. Influenza or no influenza, he must go down to Pardon Court at once.

He hurried across the room, paid his bill, and shouted to a boy to get him a taxi. One couldn't risk the Underground in circumstances like these.

But five minutes were wasted in finding the cab which on ninety-nine days out of a hundred was always waiting on the rank opposite the Corinthian front door. And in Fleet Street a many-bannered procession of unemployed kept the whole stream of east-bound traffic waiting while it wended its gloomy way along the gutter. Bill's watch showed that it was nearly a quarter to four by the time that the taxi reached the entrance to his little blind-alley. He jumped out while it was

still moving, handed the driver the coins which had been warming in his hand for most of the journey, and dashed across the pavement.

If he had expected to find the stairway blocked with creditors and newspaper reporters he was agreeably disappointed. But he soon saw or thought he saw why. The outer door of Messrs. Fraser and Company's office was shut, and for the second time in his life he read one of M. Thibaud's neatly-typed notices. "Office closed to-day" it said.

Bill thundered on the panels and hearing sounds of life from within shouted out: "It's all right. It's me—Mr. Fraser."

There was a noise of bolts being withdrawn the door was cautiously opened, and revealed—Barrett.

Bill all but fell backwards down the stairs.

"You!" he gasped. "What——?"

"Thank heaven you've come, sir," said Barrett, seizing his employer by the arm, and pulling him into the office. "Where's Mr. Lucas?"

"Lucas?" stammered Bill. "He's gone back again. What on earth are you doing here?"

"But he wired for me to come over," said Barrett in amazement. "I've only just arrived. I flew."

"You flew?" Bill suddenly felt himself on the verge of laughter, but Barrett's face made him stop in time. "Show me the telegram."

"Here it is, sir. '*Come to London as soon as you possibly can. Very urgent. Lucas.*' There you are, sir. Mr. Pilbrow wanted me to catch the boat train, but——"

"Pilbrow? Did you leave him in Paris?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was anything—I mean, was everything all right there?"

"Everything, sir. Why shouldn't it be? I only saw the paper when I got in just now, but—well, Mr. Lucas must have told you, sir. Of course there's nothing in it. Why, he only left the office when he got your wire last night. Do you know what he wanted

me for, sir? Mr. Thibaud said he'd gone to your flat, but your housekeeper said she didn't know where either of you was."

"Is Thibaud still here?"

"Yes, sir. We didn't know what was best to do. But we thought we'd better keep callers out until we could hear from Mr. Lucas or you."

"Quite right. Have there been any?"

Barrett smiled.

"One or two, sir," he said. "But we didn't look to see who they were. Is Mr. Lucas coming on here, sir?"

"No," said Bill. "I told you. He's gone back to Paris. And I'm very sorry, Barrett, but I think you'd better go after him. Telegraph to say you're coming. Do you see?"

"Yes, sir. But excuse my asking——"

"I can't explain what's been going on," Bill interrupted, "because I don't understand it myself. But I'll tell you one thing. I never sent that telegram to Mr. Lucas, and he never sent the other one to you. The same people who put this report in the evening papers wanted to get you and him away from Paris, I'm very much afraid because they're up to some mischief there."

"But how was I——" Barrett began.

"Of course you couldn't tell; any more than Mr. Lucas could. But I think you'd better go back by to-night's boat. Tell Mr. Lucas I sent you."

"Yes, sir. But do you think——?"

"I don't know what to think, Barrett, and that's the truth. Now I must just have a word with Thibaud and then——"

"Oh, excuse me, sir. I'm afraid I forgot. I've got a note for you from Mr. Pilbrow."

"From Pilbrow?" snapped Bill. "Let me have it."

He seized the envelope from Barrett's hand, and tore it open. And then, with some belated idea of caution, he hurried through into his little room before unfolding the sheet of notepaper.

The message consisted of exactly two words.

"Keep cool—C. P."

And at this final and, as it seemed to him, gratuitous insult, all the bottled-up irritation and mystification which had been accumulating in Bill's shattered frame since the moment of George's unexpected arrival that morning, burst out into one blaze of fury.

Keep cool, indeed! He'd kept a damned sight too cool for a damned sight too long. If Pilbrow could send that kind of message, it meant that Pilbrow had known the whole infernal plot from the beginning, and removed the last shadow of doubt that the whole confounded business had been arranged from start to finish by that tea-drinking old devil in Imperial Buildings. For six months they'd been working away in a fool's paradise—and a quite unmentionable paradise at that—and the whole point of it all from the first second, the whole idea in letting them build up and expand the agency, had been to wait for the right moment and then turn round and smash it. But they needn't think it was going to be as easy as all this. He wasn't afraid of Osman Girling—why should he be, when he'd got nothing to lose?—and he was going round to his office now, and he'd get an explanation from him or choke him with one of his own, damned, effeminate sofa-cushions.

"Thibaud!" he shouted, going to the door of his room. "Keep the place shut until you hear from me. Don't see anybody. Don't tell anybody anything. If I don't see you again to-night, I'll be back in the morning; and meanwhile—oh, yes, meanwhile keep cool. Do you hear? I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Good-bye, Barrett. You'll go back to-night, won't you?"

"Yes, sir. Certainly, but——"

"That's all right, then."

And disregarding M. Thibaud's bilingual cries and expostulations which were rising in a hysterical fountain in the background, he dashed out of the office, down the stairs and through into the street.

The next instant he had leapt at the handle of a crawling taxi.

"Imperial Buildings," he shouted. "And as quick as you can."

Once again he took the change from his pocket the moment the cab started, and before it had stopped he was out on the pavement, had flung his fare to the astonished driver, and sped into the big entrance. He wasn't going to wait for any hall-porters or liftmen this time. He ran up the stairs, along the corridor to the door marked "No Exit," and burst it open.

The antechamber was in the occupation of a lady secretary, and as she saw Bill, she got up from behind her desk.

"Mr. Girling's not here," she said.

"Where is he, then?"

"He's not here," she repeated. And at this moment Bill's ears caught the sound of raised voices from the inner room.

"Who's in there?" he snapped.

"I tell you Mr. Girling isn't here," said the lady secretary once more. "Will you kindly state your business?"

She seemed infected by some radiation from the central nerve-storm of which Bill had experienced so many manifestations since the morning, for her voice rose to a most un-lady-secretary-like squeak, and she came out from behind her desk as if to bar the way.

"You can't possibly go in there," she said, shrilly. "Will you please——"

"I'm sorry," said Bill. "You can say I hit you, if you like. But I'm going in."

The lady secretary looked wildly round, as if to decide whether to summon help through the telephone or to fall back on physical resistance and shrieks; and in this moment's hesitation, Bill slipped past her.

"It's all right," he said politely. "I'll say it wasn't your fault." And with these words he opened the door of the presence-chamber and disappeared from the lady secretary's sight.

The room seemed to be full of cigar-smoke and noise, and lit as it was by one solitary standard lamp, it was impossible for a moment to say how many occupants it contained. The only thing of which it seemed at all

easy to be certain was that a violent dispute was going on between two hoarse-voiced men, while occasional bleating interruptions were coming out of the darkness beyond them. Not for a second did either of the two shouting and gesticulating figures pause to look towards the door, and it was clear that neither of them could have realised that they had been joined by a new arrival.

"Look here," Bill began with his usual formula, but his voice was instantly drowned by the sound of the quarrel.

"It's no use losing your head," barked one of these dimly-seen silhouettes; and as he spoke, the other one stepped forward into the circle of light. His face was distorted with passion and thrown into unnatural shadows on the side away from the lamp, but in one, brief, stupefied flash, Bill saw who it was. Forgetting everything except this extraordinary sight, he stood rooted to the floor, his hand still unconsciously clutching the door-knob.

What, in heaven's name, had brought Austin Harvey here?

"Don't you worry about my head," he was shouting. "You'd better look out for your own, if you don't give me that paper back. You know perfectly well the whole thing's a bluff, and if you think you can——"

"It's not a bluff," broke in the other. "You go down to Nottingham and see. Lord Longwood has written his resignation without pressure from anyone, and——"

"Oh, rot," said Harvey. "Lord Longwood never wrote anything without pressure. You're not going to make me believe that. Come on, hand it over. Didn't you hear him say he'd changed his mind?"

"No, no," said the voice of the man in the background. "Let Sir Donald keep it, Austin. I can't go back like that. I——"

"Oh, cut it out," Harvey burst in angrily. "Why can't you leave this to me? Now, then, Sir Donald, are you going to give it up? If Lord Longwood insists

on resigning, his letter must go to the Board. Nobody's going to pay any attention to documents which you extort from him in this way. You're not the Board, you know."

Sir Donald Hammersmith gave a savage laugh.

"Not yet," he said. "And now, as you've heard what your employer says, perhaps you'll kindly take him away. You're too late, my friend. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes, yes," entreated Lord Longwood from his seat in the darkness. "It's settled, Austin. I know you've done everything you can, but it's settled. I can't—I'm not going on."

Harvey had been standing glaring at Sir Donald during this interruption, but at these last words he swung suddenly round.

"Listen," he said, in the tone in which one might perhaps speak to some one else's dog. "Are you going to let me get you out of this mess, or aren't you? What do you suppose these people have been playing for from the beginning, except your resignation? I tell you these failures are all part of their game; the whole thing's a bluff to try and frighten you out."

"I'm very sorry," said Lord Longwood, with feeble sullenness. "But I can't help it. I've given Sir Donald my word, and I'm not going back on it. I've had enough of this thing."

"You've had enough of it, have you?" shouted Harvey. "You think you can just drop out and run away the first moment things don't go straight? But what about your money? Do you think you're ever going to see any of that again, if you resign? What do you want to do? Sit still and let Sir Donald and his friends call on you for every halfpenny you've guaranteed? You're grateful to Sir Donald for his offer, are you?" he sneered. "You're very much obliged to him for saying he'll take your money and do what he likes with it? Didn't you hear him saying that he wasn't on the Board yet? Well, you can take my word that unless you change your mind and back me up, he'll

be on the Board by Monday, and what's more, he'll be in the Chair. The protector of the widows' savings, that's what he's going to be. And as for you, you'll be the laughing-stock of the whole City. You don't suppose you're going to keep your place on those committees of yours, do you, or anywhere else for that matter, when people hear how you've muddled this thing?"

"I haven't muddled it," said Lord Longwood, sulkily. "It's you that's muddled it."

"Oh, I have, have I? You go and tell that to the other directors, and see what they say. Good Lord! to think that I should have wasted my time looking after you for over six months, and then when you've gone and messed the whole show up, to be told that I've muddled it. Yes, you'd better resign, I should say. And if you think I'm going to do any more for you after this, then you're jolly well mistaken. I'm through with you, do you hear? And you needn't think that just because your daughter——"

He broke off with a stifled cry. For, unseen by all, a figure had hurled itself towards the centre of the group, and with a flying leap had grasped him with both hands by the throat. With a crash, Mr. Girling's little tea-table rolled against the standard lamp, and the next instant Harvey, Bill and the lamp all went to the ground together in one glorious, smashing thud.

"Here! What the devil——" shouted Sir Donald Hammersmith. "Where does the light turn on?"

He began plunging in the direction of the doorway, crunching china beneath his feet at every moment, while thumps, bangs, gurgles and sounds of suffocation continued to fill the darkened room.

"Let go my leg!" cried Lord Longwood, whose efforts to reach assistance had unfortunately brought him into the very vortex of the struggle. The vice-like grasp was mysteriously released, and he fell, staggering, on to the sofa.

"Sir Donald! Sir Donald!" he gasped. "Turn on the light. They're killing each other."

For a brief moment a beam of light shone through the door on a vision of what looked like about eighteen arms and legs engaged in furious combat, and then it was withdrawn.

"Good God!" said Lord Longwood. "He's left us. Here, Austin, get up at once. What on earth are you doing?"

"Ah, you would, would you?" said somebody on the floor, and the next instant the battle had begun again on the other side of the sofa. Three times heavy bodies hurled themselves against this piece of furniture, and each time Lord Longwood made violent but ineffective grabs at portions of human clothing; and then, as suddenly as the noise had begun, there was complete silence. Were they both dead? Or were they only waiting to begin again? Lord Longwood peered into the blackness, and then, as he still heard no sound, he also began groping his way towards the door. But before he could reach it, there was a sudden movement from behind, some one bumped past him, and he heard them scratching at the panels, feeling for the handle.

"Stop!" he shouted, with courage which might have done honour to a far older peerage. "Turn on the lights. You're not to leave the room."

"Turn 'em on yourself," answered a thick and indistinct voice—the voice of one who might reasonably be imagined to be holding a handkerchief to a bleeding mouth. "I'm going to find Sir Donald Hammersmith." And at these words, the door again opened, a silhouette appeared and vanished, and with the sound of a closing latch, darkness returned.

"Don't let him get away," cried Lord Longwood in the direction of the door; and plunging forward, he in turn began feeling everywhere for the handle. But to all his shouts there was no answering sound from without, and when at last he opened the door, the outer room, save for his own hat and overcoat, was completely empty.

He paused in a moment's indecision, and then, humanity or curiosity triumphing over his first instinct

to follow the others into the street, he turned back. Just inside the doorway he discovered the electric switches, and as he fumbled at the first which his fingers had touched, the big alabaster bowl in the middle of the ceiling flooded the room with radiance.

At first as he stood there, blinking, by the door, his eyes could see no sign of what he was seeking. The floor was littered with cigars and broken tea-things, a couple of chairs as well as the standard lamp were lying on their sides, and at his feet was somebody's overcoat, tossed in a disorderly heap. Then, as he continued to peer nervously round the room, he suddenly saw, projecting beyond the end of the big sofa, a human hand and a portion of a human arm.

But surely Austin Harvey's coat had been black, and not grey.

"Good God!" said Lord Longwood again. "It must be the other fellow."

And with a last glance behind him at the empty antechamber, he stepped cautiously across the battlefield.

The man was lying on his face, with one arm crumpled under him, and for the moment he looked most horribly and circumstantially dead. But even as Lord Longwood bent over him, he gave a muffled groan and rolled over on one side.

"My head," he remarked, and then he opened one eye.

"Good God!" said Lord Longwood for the third time. "It's Bill Fraser."

And, as we have of course known all along, it was. Bill opened his other eye very carefully.

"Influenza," he added.

"What?" asked Lord Longwood, stooping down to catch this murmur.

"Influenza," repeated Bill.

"No, no. You've been having a fight. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember," said Bill, rather irritably.

"I said he wouldn't have knocked me out, if I hadn't

just had influenza. Where's he gone?" he added, trying to sit up, and immediately falling prostrate again with another groan.

"He's gone away. Has he hurt you?"

"No," said Bill. "I was just about finishing him off, I believe. Only I think I must have fainted. Influenza, you know," he threw in once again. "Oughtn't to have come out really."

He made another effort to sit up, clutched at the leg of Lord Longwood's trousers, and by this means gained time to recover his momentarily doubtful balance.

"I'm all right," he said. And this time he really got on to his feet.

"Quite all right," he added, and sat down heavily on the end of the sofa.

"But how did you get here?" asked Lord Longwood, staring at him in mingled amazement and admiration. "What were you trying to do?"

"I came here to look for—for somebody," said Bill. "I'm afraid—I'm afraid I got rather excited."

"But where on earth did you come from?" asked Lord Longwood, and then, without waiting for an answer, he went on: "I say, do you really think you hurt him?"

"Look at that," answered Bill, displaying a set of gory knuckles. "I did that on his teeth."

Lord Longwood bent forward and blinked at this blood-thirsty spectacle.

"Pretty good, considering it was in the dark," said Bill, modestly.

"But what were you trying to do?"

Bill seemed to be searching his memory.

"I'm not sure," he said finally. "I suppose I ought to apologise to you for damaging your secretary, but, well, dash it all, I'd heard him talking to you, and it was about as much as I could stand. If I've got you into a worse mess than you're in already, I'm sorry; but——"

"That's all right, Bill. Here, take my handkerchief." For Bill, unable to find his own, was staunching his

wounds on the far from antiseptic fabric of Mr. Girling's sofa.

"Oh, thanks awfully," he said. "And look here, Lord Longwood, I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid I overheard some of what you were all saying, and—I'm awfully sorry, but I think I'm going to faint again."

Lord Longwood caught him just in time and pushed him back on to the sofa.

"Influenza," muttered Bill feebly. "Makes me feel so dashed flimsy."

"Yes, yes," said Lord Longwood. "Don't try and talk. Just take my arm, and I'll drive you back."

There was a period of whirling lights, revolving corridors and undulating stairs, and then Bill suddenly felt the cool air of the street, and realised that he was being helped into a motor.

"My overcoat," he murmured.

"It's all right," said Lord Longwood. "I've got it here. Just let me pull down the window a little."

"Ah," said Bill. "That's better. And then as the car gathered speed, he suddenly remembered what he had been trying to say when this second attack had seized him.

"Look here, Lord Longwood," he said. "You've got to stick to that chairmanship. This thing *is* a bluff; I know it is."

"Yes, yes," said Lord Longwood soothingly.

"But I *know* it is. These people—Hammersmith and his gang—have fixed up the whole thing, so as to get you out and get themselves in. I suppose the arrangements have all gone through in your name, and they think they can hold you to whatever you've guaranteed and come in at the top without paying. But you mustn't let them. You must tell the Board what Sir Donald has done, and——"

"No," said Lord Longwood, breaking in. "I've resigned. They can go off with my money, if they like; but I've finished. I'm not going on."

"But Harvey said——"

"That makes no difference. It was Harvey who got

me into this, but I'll take my own chances of getting out again. I've listened to Harvey for long enough."

"But, Lord Longwood, you can't do that. I mean—don't you see—that isn't all. There's the other thing too. There's—there's Leslie."

"We'll see what Leslie says when you tell her how he spoke to me in that room just now," said Lord Longwood, with surprising vigour.

"Oh, no," cried Bill. "I couldn't possibly. You don't understand. I mean—I can't—I . . ."

And once again the street lamps began swooping up and down, while the noise of the motor was drowned in the thumping of his own heart. Somebody was speaking; saying something about Leslie. His own, lovely, cool Leslie, who was going to marry somebody else, because of the opera-glasses that he had given her. What was that? A doctor? No, thanks, he'd finished with the doctor. The doctor had said he could go out again; go out again and fight somebody; only it must be in the dark.

Hullo; had the motor broken down? That was funny; he didn't know that Maurice had been driving them.

"Just take his other arm, Slater," said Lord Longwood. "I'm afraid he's fainted again. We'll put him on the sofa in my study and telephone for Dr. Cotter. Come along, Bill, you're nearly there."

Front door steps. Hundreds and thousands and millions of front door steps. And somebody's hall. Of course; he must be going to another dance. Dash it, why hadn't he dressed?

"I'm awfully sorry," Bill began apologising. And then suddenly the mists swirled away. Some one was coming down the stairs. Good Lord! he mustn't let Leslie see him like this. He shook himself free from his supporters, and tried to go back towards the door.

"Look out, sir," said the butler, hurrying after him.

"Darling——" began Lord Longwood; but Leslie had jumped the last three steps and flung her arms round him.

"Oh, Papa," she cried. "Never mind anything else. Everything's all right. He rang me up on the telephone five minutes ago. Papa, darling, I'm jilted!"

And at these last, joyfully-spoken words, Bill the bachelor stopped, tottered, and collapsed into Slater's arms.

VII

THE LAST OF THE BACHELOR

I

OUT of a vast blackness Bill became gradually aware of something large and globular, which had been deposited, apparently, on his waistcoat. Unless, which seemed unlikely, it was a melon, it must be—yes, it was—somebody's head.

"Hullo," he said.

The head bounded in the air and revealed itself as attached to a professionally-clothed body.

"Hullo," said Dr. Cotter. "Feeling better?"

"I'm all right," said Bill, sitting up. "What's the time? I mean, is it still Friday?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Is it true that you've just been having influenza?"

Bill considered for a moment.

"Quite true," he said.

"Badly?"

"Well, I was in bed for a week."

"Oh," said the doctor. "Then why aren't you dead?"

Bill didn't seem to catch the connection.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well," said the doctor, with traces of annoyance, "you ought to be, you know. And if you're not, you ought to have got pneumonia. Why haven't you?"

Bill pondered again.

"I suppose you've cured me," he suggested at length.

"I wish I thought I had," said the doctor regretfully.

"But I can't find anything to cure. Though why you haven't fractured your skull," he went on sadly, "I

really don't know. You've got a lump at the back of your head the size of a football."

"Have I?" asked Bill.

He raised his hand to investigate. Yes, it was a bit painful. But it was ridiculous to talk of footballs like that.

"It's nothing, really," he announced.

Dr. Cotter laughed mirthlessly.

"I wash my hands of you," he said, rising to his feet. "I've never met a case where a man took more trouble to kill himself with less result. If Lord Longwood didn't swear it was impossible, I should have said that you'd been blind drunk for at least six hours. It's the only explanation I can possibly imagine. It would have been a pleasure to dissect you," he added gloomily.

"It's very good of you to say so," said Bill. "I'm afraid I've given a lot of trouble."

"Well, you'll live to give somebody a great deal more before you're finished with," said the doctor. "You'd better stay where you are for another hour, and then you can go home. You can run home, if you like, but I'd sooner you took a cab. And it seems silly to tell you to wrap yourself up, but you might as well do it. Anything else?"

"No, thanks," said Bill. "That is—I mean—if you could just . . ."

He began fumbling at his pocket.

"No, no," said the doctor. "That's all settled. You're Lord Longwood's guest. Good-night. Let me know when you're having your next fight, and I'll come along."

He picked up his bag and left the room.

Bill gazed round the walls. This must be Lord Longwood's study, he supposed. He glanced at his watch. Seven o'clock. He wondered how long he had been here. And why had the doctor told him to wait an hour. What was the point of that? He suddenly looked round and saw a bottle of brandy and a half-empty wine-glass.

He put out a tentative hand towards it, perhaps to

test its reality, but as he did so he saw his raw knuckles and drew it back again.

"By Jove, yes," he said, and then he began remembering things. Lord Longwood was ruined, and he was ruined, and poor old George was ruined too. And Leslie? He had seen Leslie, hadn't he, in the hall. And she had said something. Something about— Yes, he remembered it all now. And what was the other thing that she had said? "Everything is all right."

"Everything is all right," he repeated aloud. Yes, even if everybody were ruined, everything was all right. It must be, if she had said so. It must be, if Leslie had said so.

"Leslie." He murmured the name half to himself. And then a little louder. "Leslie."

And from the doorway somebody answered him.

"Bill," said Leslie.

He turned his head and saw her, and the next moment—though how it happened no one can ever tell—he had risen to his feet, and she was in his arms.

"Leslie. Leslie, my darling," he said, drawing her closer and closer to him; and then, because the tears were trickling on her hair, he dared not let her go.

"Bill," she said again, and for a time all they did was to stand there, locked together, saying each other's names again and again.

"Bill. Darling Bill. You were ill, and you never told me. My poor Bill. I've been so dreadfully unhappy."

"My angel, we won't talk about it. I was a coward to leave you. Leslie. Darling. Yes, and again just like that."

Suddenly she had slipped from his arms, and they were sitting side by side on the sofa. Yet they still were holding each other's hands.

"Bill, darling, Papa has told me everything. And he says you know everything too. But you mustn't be unkind about him; or about me, Bill. You don't know what it has been."

"We won't talk of it."

"But we must, Bill. You mustn't think I cared for him. I've never loved anybody but you. Never, never, never, from the day you came on to that tennis court. But, Bill, I didn't know you cared for me too. I thought perhaps you could, but I didn't know. And that last time you came to Hare Hall—— Oh, Bill, I almost went on my knees to you and you never saw it. And then you even stopped writing to me. And after that I didn't care about anything, and I thought it would make things easier for Papa. But it only made everything much worse, and if I'd really married him, I think I should have died. But, Bill, you've rescued us. He's never coming back again. And we'll all be frightfully poor and frightfully happy, as long as we live."

And she seized up his hand and kissed the marks on it again and again, until he pulled it away and kissed her once more on the lips.

"Bill," she went on, "Papa says he'll have to give up this house and he'll have to let Hare Hall, but they can't take the White House from us, because he's given it to me. And, Bill darling, that's what I've always meant and wanted, for you and me to live there together. Only you won't mind having Papa, will you, darling? Just at first, I mean. Oh, Bill, do you remember when we were engaged before?"

"I thought you'd forgotten," he said.

"Of course I hadn't forgotten. Why do you think I wrote to you as Mr. Fraser, if I didn't remember? And why do you think I called you Bill as soon as I saw you, except that I knew I loved you. Oh, Bill, and you've never even proposed to me yet!"

"But, Leslie, I was just going to. I was; just now. Only when I saw you, there wasn't time."

"Never mind," said Leslie. "It was nicer that way. And, Bill darling, Papa looks younger than he's looked for years. He doesn't mind anything, and he'll be most terribly pleased about us. Oh, Bill, when did you first think you liked me?"

"On the tennis court, that day I first saw you. I've thought of nothing else ever since."

"But, darling, why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't, Leslie. I didn't dare. I was so poor; and—and you weren't."

"But I am now," said Leslie, smiling. "And you've done it, my angel. I'll never say it again, but it was you who sent that awful man to stay with us. But I've forgiven you, darling. I've forgiven you everything. Because—do you know why?"

"Tell me."

And she tells him again.

"But, Leslie, I can't explain it all now, but it's even more my fault than you think." And he pours out a confused account of everything that has happened since that morning when she drove him up to the office and George showed him the code telegram. For the first time he breaks his pledge not to mention Osman Girling's name, but there must be no secrets from Leslie, and has not Osman Girling already forfeited all right for it to be kept? Leslie sits looking at Bill's eyes and his ruffled hair, but listening to his voice more than to his words, and at the end all she says is: "But, darling, it was my fault really. You were only doing all these things to try and please me, weren't you? Does it mean that you have lost all your money as well?"

"I can't tell, Leslie. I can't tell until I hear from George. I can't believe that we have. But if we have, what then?"

"Nothing, darling. If you have, we'll live on mine. And so shall George Lucas. You mustn't worry about anything except getting well."

"But I am perfectly well. I was only ill because you were engaged to——"

She put her hand over his mouth.

"You mustn't ever speak of that again," she said. And, inconsistently, she added: "Bill, do you want those opera-glasses back again?"

"Oh, no." He shook his head violently. "You know, I bought them for you for Christmas really. It

was only afterwards that they turned into a wedding present."

"Oh, Bill, how sweet of you. Did you really?"

He nodded his head as forcibly as he had just shaken it.

"Bill, you'll stay to dinner, won't you? Wog's here, but you needn't think you ought to dress. There won't be anyone else."

"But what about your father?"

"Oh, he won't mind."

"But I mean, ought I—I mean—oughtn't I to—to tell him—to ask him, I mean, about us?"

"Oh, no," said Leslie. "I'll look after that. But you're not to think he won't be pleased. Bill, would you mind giving me another kiss?"

Two minutes elapsed.

"I must fly," said Leslie, suddenly rising. "Wog will be down any minute. Bill, darling, the doctor said you were too wonderful, but are you sure you feel well enough to come in to dinner?"

"I feel terribly well, you angel."

"Then I'll tell Slater to show you where to wash. Come up to the drawing-room as soon as you're ready."

She blew him a last kiss from the doorway, and was gone.

Under a dream-like Slater's guidance he removed the last traces of his fight, although brushing his hair at the back was considerably more painful than he had anticipated. And then, just as he was starting to go upstairs, he suddenly remembered Mrs. Whalley. She would have been expecting him back hours ago, and even now was probably putting the finishing touches to his dinner.

"I wonder if I could use the telephone?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir. Just through here," said the butler. Bill gave his own number, and waited.

"Hullo," said a man's voice.

Dash it! The wrong number again.

"Hullo," said Bill. "Isn't that——"

"Is that you, Bill?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Bill, it's a girl."

"A what?"

"A girl. I came round to tell you. I couldn't stay in the house."

"Oh, Maurice. How splendid! I do hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind anything."

"And how's Beatrix?"

"Beatrix is perfectly marvellous. You ought to have heard her laugh."

"Oh, I say. I am glad. I'm awfully sorry I wasn't in."

"But why aren't you? Where are you speaking from?"

"I'm at Lord Longwood's. I'm dining here. Would you mind telling Mrs. Whalley?"

"Oh, certainly, old chap. I say, what's all this in the evening papers?"

"All what?"

"All this bust-up in the City. They say Lord Longwood has resigned from this new combine, and it's going to be reconstructed. Why, dash it, you ought to know all about it."

"I'll tell you when I see you," said Bill, after a second's pause. "I can't explain on the telephone."

"Oh, all right. I say, you're not mixed up in this French business, are you? I see they've got hold of the same name. But it says it's one of the biggest firms there is, so I suppose you're all right."

"I'm perfectly all right," said Bill, blessing the newspapers' exaggeration and his brother's tactlessness. "I'll tell you all about it when we meet." And then he suddenly added: "Look here, will you give Beatrix a message?"

"Oh, rather. What is it?"

"Give her my love, and say I'm never going to run away again."

"But what does that mean?"

"Oh, she'll understand."

"Well, I'm blessed if I do."

"Never mind, Maurice. If she doesn't tell you, I'll tell you to-morrow. Don't forget about Mrs. Whalley."

"Oh, all right."

"And I say, I really am most awfully glad. Good-bye."

A girl, you see. Of course it was a girl. What else could it have been on a day like this? Poor old Maurice. But it was all for the best, if he only knew it. He'd see that later on.

He left the telephone and went slowly up the stairs. On the first landing he stopped. Who on earth could that be, whistling—or perhaps one should say trying to whistle—in the drawing-room? He peered through the open door.

Good heavens! It was Lord Longwood. Standing on the hearthrug and blinking at the opposite wall, where his father glowered from the heavy gilt frame, he was blowing a windy and unmelodious tune from his pursed lips.

Bill hesitated, and then went in.

"Hullo," said Lord Longwood, breaking off suddenly.

"Leslie said—Leslie asked me to stay to dinner," said Bill, a little nervously.

"That's all right," answered Lord Longwood. "I hear you've recovered."

"Oh, rather. I'm most awfully sorry I should——"

"That's all right," said Lord Longwood again.

He left the hearthrug, and taking Bill's unresisting hand, wrung it warmly.

"That's all right," he said for the third time.

Bill tried to answer.

"I—I——" he stammered. "I mean, I can't—I . . ."

Lord Longwood released his hand.

"Don't——" he began, and then he also seemed to be in difficulties with his voice.

"It's—I quite—I think . . ." he said.

He took out his watch and put it back again without looking at it.

"I—I'll tell Slater we'll have champagne," he finished with a rush, and fled from the room.

There was a sound from outside as of a landslide on the stairs, and Miss Angela Lorden burst into the drawing-room.

"Oh, Bill," she cried. "Leslie's just told me. Oh, Bill, I'm so *terribly* pleased. Oh, Bill, I'm going to embrace you."

And she did; nearly bearing him to the floor, such was her violence.

"Bill, it's exactly what I've always wanted—and I hear you gave Harvey a black eye too. I do congratulate you."

"I may have," said Bill modestly, and with his eye on the open doorway.

"You did," said Wog. "He came just now to ask for his things to be sent on, and Slater saw him. Oh, Bill, why didn't you do it before?"

"I can't think," said Bill.

"And, Bill, I say. Why did you never write to me?"

"I was going to. I was really. But I had influenza, you know."

"Bill, I suppose you read my letter in spite of the telegram. You did, didn't you?"

"What letter?" asked Bill.

Wog's reply took the form of a thump on the back.

"That's right," she said. "There wasn't any letter, was there?"

"There may have been," said Bill. "But anyhow it's burnt."

"I don't pretend that I'm a lady," answered Wog, with a look of understanding; "but I always said you were a gentleman. Look out, here's Leslie."

2

Bill slept on until nearly ten o'clock the next morning and was woken at length by Mrs. Whalley's entrance with a telegram.

"Absolute lie everything in perfect order make papers print denial Barrett arrived safely Pilbrow completely vanished returning Saturday by boat cheerio—George."

"No, no answer," said Bill.

He sprang out of bed and flew to the telephone. In a couple of minutes he was speaking to M. Thibaud. But M. Thibaud had, it seemed, also received a telegram from Paris. The drawbridge was down at Pardon Court, and everything was again in working order.

"I tell the newspapers when they send, that it is all their own confusion," said M. Thibaud.

"That's right," said Bill. "And I'm going to make them publish a contradiction."

"But there is no need, Mr. Fraser. The contradiction is there this morning already."

"What?"

"In the newspapers, yes."

"Oh," said Bill. "Right you are. Well, I'll be back on Monday."

He hung up the receiver and turned hastily to his morning paper.

"It is understood," he read in the italicised summary which followed the headlines and preceded the padding, *"that in the crisis which has thus arisen, Sir Donald Hammersmith, K.B.E., representing important financial interests, has offered his services to the Board of Directors, and that this offer has been accepted. An announcement as to the Board's policy will in all probability be issued this afternoon. In the meantime we are informed that the subscription lists will be closed."*

"Sir Donald Hammersmith states that while it is unfortunately the case that Messrs. Peter Miller and Sons of Nottingham have temporarily suspended business, the report which appeared in several of yesterday afternoon's papers that the Agence Lemaître of Paris had also closed its doors is unauthorised and incorrect. Sir Donald has received definite news that this agency, which, it is understood, is in reality a British-owned business, is and has been in no kind of difficulties whatsoever, and this in-

formation should do much to remove the impression which was current yesterday that further failures might shortly be expected."

"Oh, he has, has he?" said Bill to himself. "And I suppose he thinks that George and I are going to sit down after that and say nothing more about it."

But it was dashed puzzling. Yesterday's theories no longer seemed to fit to-day's altered circumstances. For if all that Messrs. Girling and Hammersmith had meant to do was to spread the rumour of Lemaître's failure, only to contradict it again within twenty-four hours, why should they have gone to the trouble and expense of subsidising the business for six months? Did they count on George and himself feeling so grateful to them that no awkward questions would ever be asked? It seemed impossible. Gratitude would be the last thing that they would either feel or expect. One might be quite certain that whatever Osman Girling's plans had been, they had been based on cold, business facts, and not on anything so remote from his experience as human emotions. Bill felt now much as he had the day when an ammunition dump had exploded within a few hundred yards of him, and had yet done nothing worse than knock him down. Was this thing all over, and had he escaped with nothing worse than a fright; or was there going to be another and possibly much bigger explosion while he was still congratulating himself on his safety?

If Osman Girling had got wind of Harvey's plans six months ago and had been conspiring all along to create this panic for his own ends, had he now got everything that he wanted? Or was he still waiting to exact further payment from Messrs. Fraser and Company for the assistance which he had forced on them?

"I give it up," said Bill at last. "I must wait till I see George this evening. Perhaps he'll be able to see further into this brick wall than I can."

He took up the telephone receiver again, and gave the number of the house in Brook Street.

"Oh, Mrs. Whalley," he said later, as she was clearing away the breakfast things, "I shall be out to lunch to-day, and all afternoon, and—oh, yes, I shall be out to dinner."

"Do you think you ought, sir? Do you think you're feeling well enough?"

"Well enough?" repeated Bill. "I've never felt better in my life. Wasn't I out all yesterday? Oh, and by the way, I'm going to get married."

"Do you mean to-day, sir?" asked Mrs. Whalley.

"No, I'm afraid not. But quite soon. Oh, yes, as soon as possible."

Mrs. Whalley put down her tray, leant against the wall, seemed to choke, to recover herself, and began to weep.

"Here. Look out. I say, don't do that. I didn't mean to upset you. Mrs. Whalley, for heaven's sake——"

"Oh, Mr. Fraser," sobbed his housekeeper. "I hope you'll excuse me, sir. B-but I can't help thinking of myself."

"But you'll be all right, Mrs. Whalley. I'll see that you get a good place. There's nothing on earth to worry about like that."

"Oh, no, sir," she wept. "It isn't that. But I can't help thinking—I can't help thinking what a beautiful b-bride I was when I m-m-married Whalley."

"I'm sure you were," shouted Bill, with every sound of conviction. "I'm quite certain you were. There, there; there's nothing to cry about. Really there isn't."

"I'm sorry, sir," gulped Mrs. Whalley. "I'm sure I hope you'll be very happy, sir." She wiped her eyes on her apron. "I hope you'll excuse me," she said again.

"Of course. I mean, there's nothing—— I mean, you mustn't think about it."

"No, sir. But if you could have seen my photo . . ."

Words failed her, and snatching at the tray, she stumbled from the room.

"Poor old idiot," muttered Bill to himself, gazing

after her uncomfortably. "Perhaps if I get her those seats for the Coliseum . . ."

He frowned for a moment. Life was always bobbing up where one least expected it. A complicated business, in a way. Full of tears, and laughter, and other pointless extravagances.

But worth it?

The frown vanished. Of course it was worth it. It was the most wonderful, marvellous, intoxicating thing that there had ever been.

3

When one is first engaged—whatever one may do before or afterwards—one goes everywhere in taxicabs. It is the only thing to do. And so Bill drove to Brook Street, and, what is more, he kept the cab waiting outside. He did this because in some strange way it helped to dispel the groundless but ever-present feeling that it was all so much too good to be true.

Slater's smile—now grown to even more than confidential proportions, was also of assistance.

"In the morning-room, sir," he said, and at the morning-room door he left him.

Leslie rose from her writing-table as Bill entered, and though neither of them would have noticed what we did, we turn aside for a few minutes and look out of the window. When we look round again, they are on the settee together, in front of the fire.

"And you're sure you're feeling well enough to come?" asks Leslie.

"Darling, you've cured me; absolutely and completely. Yesterday morning I was so feeble I could hardly move, and now——"

It's annoying, but we have to look away again.

"I say, how soon can we be married?" asked Bill, presently.

"Well, Wog says we ought to put a thing in the newspapers that it's broken off, and then wait six weeks, and then put in another one about you and me, and then wait six weeks again."

"Never mind what Wog says. I've got a much better idea. Couldn't we say that the newspapers have made a mistake, and that you were really engaged to me all the time? Then we could be married in a month. Or perhaps sooner."

Leslie laughed entrancingly.

"We must talk to Papa about it," she said. "Bill, Papa sat up last night looking at all his papers, and he's come to the conclusion that he'll still have a little money left after all, even if they make him pay everything that he's promised to pay. Darling, I hope you're not disappointed."

"Well, if it comes to that," said Bill, "I've just discovered that, as far as I can make out, I'm not ruined either. But you won't mind, will you?"

"Tell me," said Leslie. And when he had told her: "But do you mean that you've got to go on going to Paris?"

"Well, not just yet, whatever happens. I must talk to George about it."

"No," said Leslie. "I shall talk to him, and I shall see that you stay in England. Bill, Papa wanted to know if you couldn't help him, perhaps, to get his business straight. He really isn't fit to sit up, as he did last night, trying to do everything himself."

"Why, of course I will. I mean, if I can. But I'm not as efficient as—as some people."

"No, darling; and that's why I love you so much. But I know you could help him like anything, really. You know, Bill, he's never wanted to be rich. He never *was* rich, until Grandpapa died. And he told me this morning that he's happier already than he has ever been since that happened."

"And you?"

"I'm happier than I've ever been in my life," said Leslie. "You see," she went on, "Grandpapa was a very clever old man, Bill, but he couldn't understand anyone wanting to do anything except make money. And he bullied poor Papa most dreadfully, because when Papa was a young man he wanted to learn how

to paint. You mayn't believe it, but he did. And Papa gave in, and did everything that Grandpapa told him, and then when Grandpapa died, it seemed too late to do anything except go on as he was. And he'd have gone on for ever, if this hadn't happened. But now he's going to resign from all those committees, and we're all going to have fun, and even if they wanted to turn him out of the House of Lords, he wouldn't mind. He never asked to go there. I wonder if you understand ? ”

“ I think I do,” said Bill.

“ And you know, darling, far the biggest part of Grandpapa's money came out of the war. You—you see what I mean, don't you ? ”

“ You're an angel,” said Bill. “ But then,” he added, “ I've always known that.”

“ Have you, Bill ? You ought to have told me before. And have you told anyone about—about us, yet ? ”

“ Only my housekeeper, so far,” said Bill. “ But I thought we might go and look at Maurice's new baby to-day, and then we could tell him, and Beatrix.”

“ But do you think they'll like me enough ? ”

“ No,” said Bill. “ I don't see how they could. But we must risk that. I say, Leslie.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ You don't think I'm middle-aged still, do you ? ”

“ Middle-aged ? Never.”

“ I'm—I'm twenty-nine—you know.”

“ I don't mind what you are, darling, as long as you're mine.”

“ And, Leslie.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ I don't know. I like your name.”

“ And anything else ? ”

“ And your nose.”

“ And anything else ? ”

“ And you.”

Later on they went into Lord Longwood's study, where Leslie listened in silent admiration to Bill's not

over-skilful attempts to assist her father in discovering how far he could still be said to be solvent. But, shorn of technicalities and the other confusions with which everything was still to some extent surrounded, the broad outlines of the situation were sufficiently clear. The ingenious Harvey had, it appeared, secured the necessary secrecy in his plans by the bold and simple means of pledging his employer's credit in almost every imaginable direction. The whole thing, practically, had been arranged on Lord Longwood's personal guarantee. If not formally, then at any rate as good as actually, he had been induced to underwrite considerably the greater part of his own issue, yet with no discoverable safeguard in case the issue should fail. In other words the new directors could call on him to provide practically as much of the required capital as they chose, and the greater proportion of this not even as a loan, but as a very definite and irrecoverable gift. What the actual figures would be, time only could show.

But Lord Longwood wouldn't hear of resistance.

"It's all right," he said, placidly. "They know what my father left, and they won't dare ask for more than they think I've got. I knew I was risking this when I resigned yesterday, but it was cheaper than being driven mad, and I ought still to have something left. I don't expect anybody to praise me for what I've done, Bill; I know I haven't even had a run for my money; but, well, I'm nearly sixty, and I want a little peace." He got up, crossed the room, and kissed his daughter. "And you needn't think they can touch anything of yours, darling," he said. "That horrible fellow saw to that all right."

Leslie stroked his arm gently.

"Papa, darling," she said. "Anything that's mine is yours; always. And it's only because I know it's happier for you, that I don't make you take it and go back to fight those men and beat them. But don't you think we ought to send a cheque for those people at Nottingham who've lost their jobs because of all this?"

"Eh?" said Lord Longwood. "Of course. You're quite right. I'll send it at once."

"Luncheon is served," said Slater, appearing at the door. "And your taxi-driver, sir," he added, turning to Bill. "He wants to know if he's still to wait."

"Good Lord!" said Bill, starting. "I'd quite forgotten. No, of course not. I'll go out and pay him."

"Oh, Bill," said Leslie, looking at him in adoration. "What a splendid husband you'll make for a poor woman!"

4

"Yes," said George, as Bill led the way into his sitting-room late that evening, and turned on the light. "The office was shut by the time I got there last night, but it was only this morning, after Barrett had turned up, that I discovered that Pilbrow had given orders for it to be shut all day. Of course they'd no business to take his orders, but we weren't there, and they didn't know any better. There was a bit of excitement this morning when I first got there, but I told everybody that my foster-mother had died suddenly—they're awfully strong on foster-mothers in France still—and they calmed down wonderfully. Of course there was no sign of Pilbrow anywhere."

"And no news of our bill either, I suppose?"

"No, none. But I've warned Barrett, and if anyone presents it, it'll be paid all right. I say, my dear old Bill, I really am most fearfully pleased about this news of yours. I'm sorry if the old man's broke, but if he doesn't mind and you don't mind, then it might be worse. I suppose you realise that this was all my doing, really?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Didn't I tell you to marry her as long ago as last spring? Didn't I? Very well, then."

"Well, if you did," said Bill, smiling, "it was only about the five hundredth time that you've told me to marry five hundred other people. I wouldn't boast about it too much, if I were you,"

"Bill, you haven't got a photograph of her or anything, have you?" asked George, disregarding this home-truth. "I haven't seen her since she was about ten, and she may have changed. Or was that photograph in your blotting-book meant to be her?"

"Oh, you found that, did you? Well, as a matter of fact, it was. But it's not very like."

"No, no. Of course not," said George. "But I say, Bill. Wasn't I tactful not to say I'd found it before? I'm not often tactful, I quite agree; but when I am tactful, I'm one of the most tactful men there's ever been. Didn't you notice how I put the blotting-book away, and never used it? That was tact, if you like. I say, may I be your Best Man? I've got a stunning top-hat that I bought when I first came to London. You've no idea how respectable I look in it."

"Of course you may," said Bill. "You've got to be, in fact. And, George, I——"

He didn't finish the sentence. The stunning top-hat had reminded him of other things that had happened when George first came to London. Poor old George, whose tact had nearly landed him in the Divorce Court, who grinned so cheerfully at other people's good fortune, yet never by any chance complained of what he had missed himself. What, Bill asked himself, had he ever done to deserve such a wonderful friend as George had always been to him? But what, if it came to that, had he ever done to deserve anything?

There was a long silence in the little sitting-room, and then George suddenly said:

"Oh, by the way, I meant to tell you. A most extraordinary thing happened in the aeroplane."

Bill gave a start, and returned from his wool-gathering.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Tell me about the aeroplane. What was it like?"

"Well," answered George, "I don't mind telling you that when it came to the actual point, I was in no end of a funk. But I'd sworn to get back to Paris last night, and I'd told you I was going to fly, so I had to go through

with it. I missed the last car from London, and I had to take a taxi out to Croydon, and there was the aeroplane, looked dashed flimsy and dangerous, and smelling like nothing on earth. I had to run like the wind to catch it, and I'd hardly got my breath before the most appalling row started. I'd no idea what had gone wrong, until I looked out of the window and saw a lot of houses streaking past about a thousand miles below. I'm a peaceable man, Bill, and to tell the truth, it made me feel a bit sick. I looked away again quickly, and then I suddenly saw that a fellow in a little wicker chair on the other side of the gangway was shouting at me. Of course I couldn't hear a word he said, but I recognised him at once. And who do you think it was ? ”

Bill guessed wildly.

“ Not Girling, was it ? ” he tried.

“ No,” said George. “ And lucky for him it wasn't. It was old Schmidt.”

“ Schmidt ? What, not the Russian general ? ”

“ Yes. At least he isn't a Russian any longer. He's an American. We wrote letters to each other all the way across. I quite forgot how frightened I was. He's no end of a bug in a business in Chicago, and we hadn't gone more than half way before he'd written me a note to say would I take four thousand a year to look after his new London branch. Dashed funny,” laughed George, “ being offered four thousand a year in an aeroplane.”

He threw back his head and roared delightedly.

“ *Dashed* funny,” he repeated, still chuckling.

“ But, George,” said Bill, as soon as he could make himself heard. “ You'll take it, of course. I mean, if he really meant it. Why, of course you must.”

“ What, and leave you in the lurch in the middle of all this mess ? No, thank you,” said George.

“ But you don't mean to say you refused ? ”

“ Of course I refused. Not that I've heard the last of it, though. He's coming back here next week, and unless he's changed his mind, I shall have to refuse all over again. The silly ass *will* keep on saying that I

saved his life. As if that were the way to run a London branch," he added, with the utmost contempt.

"But, George, you can't chuck it away like that. You—— Hullo! This can't be the post. It's past midnight. Wait a second while I go to the door. Mrs. Whalley's in bed."

Bill hurried out into the passage and opened the front door, on which some one was just beginning to knock again.

"Fraser?" enquired about three foot six of district messenger.

"Yes," said Bill.

The boy handed him an envelope.

"Sign there, please," he said. "Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir."

"Here," asked Bill. "What time do you go to bed?"

"I'm going now, sir," said the boy with much dignity.

"Well, buy yourself a cigar with this," said Bill, and presenting him with a shilling, he shut the door.

"What was it?" asked George, as he came back into the light.

"Letter," said Bill. He ripped it open.

"I won't ask who it's from," said George, looking away. "I'm all tact to-night. I——"

"Good heavens," Bill broke in, gasping. "It's from Pilbrow!"

"What?"

"Pilbrow."

"Of all the infernal——"

"No. Wait a minute. Listen to this. I'm going to read it to you."

And here is the letter which Bill read:—

"London. Saturday evening.

"Dear Fraser,

"I'm off to America on Monday, probably for some time. The fact is that after five years with him, the governor has given me the sack, as I have been afraid that he was going to do for some time. But don't worry about me.

Santa Caterina has turned up trumps, and I can afford to do what I choose now, which will be to go into business on my own, instead of doing dirty jobs for somebody else. But I don't want to go off without telling you a little history, which you and Lucas may find interesting and possibly useful. It will also show you that even your old friend Pilbrow, whom you have probably been cursing for the last twenty-four hours, has his good points.

"This is how it all began. Early this year—I think it was some time in March—Sir Donald Hammersmith came to the governor to try and get his backing in the formation of a big hosiery amalgamation. The governor liked the idea, and Hammersmith and he sat down together and began laying their plans. But they hadn't got very far, when about two months later Hammersmith came into Imperial Buildings one day, and said that it was quite obvious from the way things were going that somebody else had got hold of the idea too, and was planning the same thing. He wanted either to give it up, or else to find the other people, if he could, and join up with them, because he said it was clear that they'd got ahead of him right at the start. But the governor said No. He said, You leave this to me, Hammersmith, and do what I say, and you'll find this is the best thing that could have happened.

"I don't believe the governor had any particular idea to start with, except that he is a first-class bluffer, and always has been. But he went down to Leicester himself and I went with him, and it wasn't long before we found out who the other people were. It was Lord Longwood himself that first gave the show away, though I admit that I opened one or two of his letters in the hotel before I was certain.

"We came back to London, and the governor told Hammersmith what he was going to do. He had marked down Peter Miller's as the best firm for his purpose—he knew the state they were in, because his money-lender friends had told him—and he began buying up their debts with one hand and lending them more money with the other—through agents, of course. It cost him a good bit, but he won't lose in the end, and it wasn't long before he'd

got them fixed so that, even if they didn't know it, he'd only got to say the word and they'd have to shut down in about five minutes. It was the governor who prepared the figures which old Ephraim Miller showed to Lord Longwood and his secretary, which made them decide to include the firm in their list, and it shows how well these figures were got out when I say that Ephraim believed in them himself. But it was Hammersmith's idea to give the finishing touch by getting Millers' a few big orders which would convince the other manufacturers that they were well over their troubles. He placed the first order himself, through an agent again, and sold the goods as Army Surplus in the East End, I believe. He didn't lose over it either. But a few days later he was in Ledburys' office and heard Lucas trying to place that Finnish order on credit. How he squared Ledbury, I never made out, but he came up to London right away and told the governor about it, and the governor sent round at once for you. The governor is very artistic in his ideas, and it appealed to him very much that this was a genuine order, and that the goods would really be used—that was, at least, unless he had to put the screws on Millers' before it was ready.

"But when you and Lucas came round the second time, and Lucas came out with that story about Lemaître, the governor thought he saw a better idea still. He would play the same game with you that he was playing with Ephraim Miller, but it would have the great advantage that when he smashed you, it would hit the industry all over, instead of only in one place. Of course it would cost him something, and he was relying on his own ability to get the business going again after you'd gone, but as he would be the biggest creditor—as he is now with Millers'—he thought it would be all right.

"He left you and Lucas in his room and came out to me and we rang up Sir Donald and a few other people who could confirm what you'd told us about Lemaître's standing, and then he made you his second offer, which you accepted. The way he'd got you fixed, you couldn't very well do anything else.

"The governor always thinks a lot of his judgment of

people, and he saw that you and Lucas were straight, and wouldn't give him away if you'd given your word. And when you wanted to arrange to buy me out again at the end of a year, he agreed at once, because he knew that by that time the whole thing would be over—one way or the other.

"When he sent me out to Paris, my instructions were to do everything I could to help in expanding the business and to encourage you to come to him for money. In both of these things I think you will admit that I succeeded.

"But here is where the governor's plans began to slip up. The more I thought of the idea of helping you two out of the mess that you'd got yourselves into, only so as to land you in a worse one, the less I liked it. Five years with the governor hadn't taught me to worry very much about other people's feelings, but I liked you, Fraser. I'd rather not say what I think of you in a business capacity—you're a bit too old-fashioned for me there—but I liked the way you put your back into things, and the way you took me on trust, and the way that you never showed off because you'd read books and learnt things that I hadn't. It struck me that we were playing a pretty low-down game on you and Lucas, and the long and short of it was that when I saw the governor again in September, I told him that I wasn't going on with it. I told him that he could get some one else to take it on, but that I'd had enough of it, and if he didn't like this, then I would resign my post with him.

"There was a bit of bluffing on both sides then. I didn't want to throw up the best-paid job I'd ever had, but the governor didn't want me to go telling his secrets. And to be perfectly honest about it, we could probably both have landed each other in gaol, if we'd wanted to. In the end the governor climbed down. I didn't know at the time that Sir Donald Hammersmith had been giving lunches to Lord Longwood's secretary, and that the result of this was that the governor had decided that it was going to be an easier job than he'd thought. But anyhow he said that if I'd carry on until he was ready, he'd see what he could arrange; and that if I could get everybody away from

Paris for twenty-four hours when he said the word, then he wouldn't smash you unless he absolutely had to. This seemed the best that I could do, though it was less than I'd tried to get, and we arranged a set of telegrams to be sent off when the governor said Go. But after this he began trying to keep things from me, and though I knew he'd stick to his word, he can always find a way round it when he wants to. This was why I tried to make you and Lucas come into the Santa Caterina. I thought it would cover your losses, if the worst came to the worst. But I couldn't tell you why, and when you both said you couldn't afford it, I had to give it up. I hope you're sorry now, because the thing was a cinch, and I knew it. I've cleaned up nearly a million dollars over it myself.

"Now we come to the end. Last Wednesday, just after I'd got to Paris, I got a wire from the governor that the United Hosiery subscriptions were to be opened on the Friday. He'd got it from Hammersmith, who knew it because he was a director of Ledbury's. I knew what to expect then. On Thursday evening Lucas got the faked wire from you. It was a bit of luck for us that you had influenza, for he didn't need any pressing to leave at once. On Friday morning we got rid of Barrett in the same way, and I had the office shut as soon as he'd started. I had already telegraphed to a London news agency that the Agence Lemaître had failed, and Hammersmith and the governor had made certain that the news, and the news about Millers', would be splashed in the afternoon papers. I stood by in Paris, waiting to know whether the bluff had worked, and about eight o'clock I got a wire saying "All clear," which meant that they'd got what they wanted and they were going to let you off, and I caught the next train back to London. I knew that Lucas would probably be back by the morning, and I didn't want to risk meeting him just at the moment.

"It seems that Sir Donald rang up Lord Longwood as soon as the evening papers came out, and said that if he'd come down and see him at the governor's office, he'd do what he could to help him, if he'd undertake to resign from the Board and give Sir Donald a free hand. He came

along at once, and it was almost too easy. He didn't hold out for any terms of any description, he signed his resignation inside five minutes and he even thanked Sir Donald for getting him out of it all. He actually said it was cheap at the price. Sir Donald could hardly believe that it was all over—for I don't mind telling you that this is going to cost Lord Longwood pretty well everything he's got—, when just at this moment, in came the secretary. Harvey, he's called. He had tracked Lord Longwood down by seeing his car outside, and the second he came in he began to kick up hell. Sir Donald says it looked for a moment as though he were going to get Lord Longwood to try and back out, and he was expecting some trouble if he did. But Lord Longwood said No, he'd had his choice and he'd had enough of this business and even if he lost every penny he had, he wasn't going on.

"Nobody seems clear what happened after that. The governor was listening through the door of the bedroom he sometimes uses there, and he says that all of a sudden somebody else flew into the room and kicked the lamp over, and before he knew what was going on he heard his best tea-service being smashed to atoms. He dashed round by the fire-escape, and he was just in time to meet Sir Donald coming out by the secretary's room.

"Sir Donald said that he'd got everything he wanted in his pocket, and that if there was a lunatic in there in the dark, the best place for him and the governor was outside. The governor didn't like the idea of leaving his room to be broken up, but it was all quite quiet again inside and they could hear Lord Longwood shouting for help. So they told Miss Gibbons—that's the governor's stenographer—to come away at once, and they all ran down the stairs together. The fact is that this wouldn't be the first time that the governor has had people after him with a knife or a gun, and they telephoned afterwards to the housekeeper to go up with a policeman, but by that time the place was empty.

"They've no idea who the lunatic was. But if it was you or Lucas, you needn't think I'm going to tell them. Only it seems a pity that you should have let old Hammersmith get away, if you were trying to give him a bit of his own back.

"This afternoon the governor had me in to see him, gave me six months' salary, and the sack. This is what I've got for trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, but I can't say I mind. The only thing I'm sorry about is that I never got you two to come into the silver mine with me.

"However, I'll give you a bit of parting advice. United Hosiery are going to offer to buy your business. The fact is that (thanks very largely to me) it's a great deal too valuable for them to leave alone, especially if you're going to cut up rough and make difficulties about dealing with them, which wouldn't be surprising if you've guessed a tenth part of what I've just told you. They'll probably offer to take over your liabilities—in other words the governor's bills, which they know they needn't pay—and offer you about ten thousand in cash for the goodwill.

"Don't you take it.

"Hold out for fifty thousand—or more if you like—and they'll pay. And if they don't, tell them that you've had this letter from me and that you know my address. C/o Kidder Peabody will always reach me, and if you want any more written evidence, I'll be pleased to supply it. For private reasons I don't want to be in England for a few years, if I can help it.

"Good luck to you both,

"Yours very truly,

"Charles Pilbrow.

"P.S.—I forgot to say that my real name is Wilbraham. Or if it isn't, it's what I shall call myself in America. I've bought a peach of a wig, and am going to be good in future."

"Well," said George, when this extraordinary letter was finished. "Pilbraham's a good fellow. But of all the infernal rogues I ever heard of, I should say he's the worst. And were you the lunatic?"

"Yes," said Bill. "I'll tell you about it afterwards. About this letter," he added; "shall I burn it?"

"It would be blackmail, of course," mused George. "But with people like that, why not?"

"I'll do whatever you say," said Bill. "But it's

dirty money. It's some of the dirtiest money there's ever been."

"We're 'old-fashioned,' aren't we?" said George, looking up. "All right. Chuck it in the fire."

"Twenty thousand pounds each?" said Bill, interrogatively, holding the letter over the glowing coals.

"Let it go."

The paper scorched, blackened and burst into flames. Soon there was only a ghostly film, which writhed uneasily, and then shot up the chimney and disappeared from sight.

5

The weather that December was so mild, that on Christmas Eve Leslie and Bill walked up the hill after lunch and sat on the seat in the Hare Hall garden where they had sat in September, until the sun had almost set. Their talk was made up of many silences, but this was the kind of conversation that they both enjoyed most. When they did speak, it was as often as not for one of them to begin, "Do you remember . . ." And though it seemed that the other one always did remember, there was no sigh of impatience at the familiarity of these alternating reminiscences.

"Papa drew a picture of me yesterday," said Leslie, presently. "He bought a block and some pencils in Wordingham, and he's terribly pleased with it. I expect he'll show it to you after dinner, and you must be terribly pleased with it too. Promise me."

"Is it like you, darling?" asked Bill.

"It's very good of my amber necklace," said Leslie. "It isn't quite so good of the rest, perhaps. But you'll say it is, won't you? And if Papa wants to draw you too, you'll let him?"

"Of course," said Bill. "And perhaps he'd give it to me to keep."

"Yes. Perhaps he would."

There was another silence, while they both watched Alfonso prospecting for invisible rabbits. Presently Bill asked;

"Have you heard from the house-agents again?"

"Oh, yes. I meant to tell you. Mr. Schmidt says he'll take Hare Hall for two years for certain. But he won't be over again until the summer, and he says there's no hurry about moving our things. But we shall have moved all that we want in a fortnight now, and then——" She looked at Bill adoringly.

"Yes," said Bill. "And Then."

"Darling, you're not taking this job with George Lucas just to please me, are you? I don't want you never to do anything, but you've worked so terribly hard all this year, and Papa's business has taken up such a lot of your time, that I shouldn't blame you if you wanted a little holiday."

"I'm very lucky to get it," said Bill. "No, darling, I mayn't be as clever as you think I am, but it's work that I know I can do. And I can't live on the money I've just got for ever."

"But, Bill, you don't like being in an office really, do you? Isn't there anything else that you'd like better?"

"I don't really like being anywhere except with you, my angel," said Bill. "But one takes what one gets. When I was at Oxford, I used to think I should like to write novels, but I know now that I couldn't if I tried. I feel things all right, but I can't describe them."

Leslie gave a little laugh.

"Yes," she said. "I found that out when I read your diaries. But you do feel them, don't you?"

Bill took her hand again.

"Like the very devil," he said slowly.

There was a further pause, and then Leslie gave a little shiver.

"Let's come back to the house," she said. "The sun has quite gone. Perhaps George will have arrived."

She got up, and arm-in-arm they went down the steep path, while the black spaniel pattered behind them.

In the hall, which was being used as dining-room and drawing-room as well, so as to save coal, they found Lord Longwood showing George his portrait of Leslie,

"Hullo, Bill," George called out, as soon as he saw him. "Here I am, you see. It's ripping of you all to have me. Leslie, you're looking more wonderful than ever. I've brought some crackers and a pâté de foie gras, just to keep up the Christmas spirit and all that sort of thing. Bill, there's an evening paper there for you, if you like. Something about a friend of yours in it."

Bill picked up the crumpled sheets from the chair where George had dropped them.

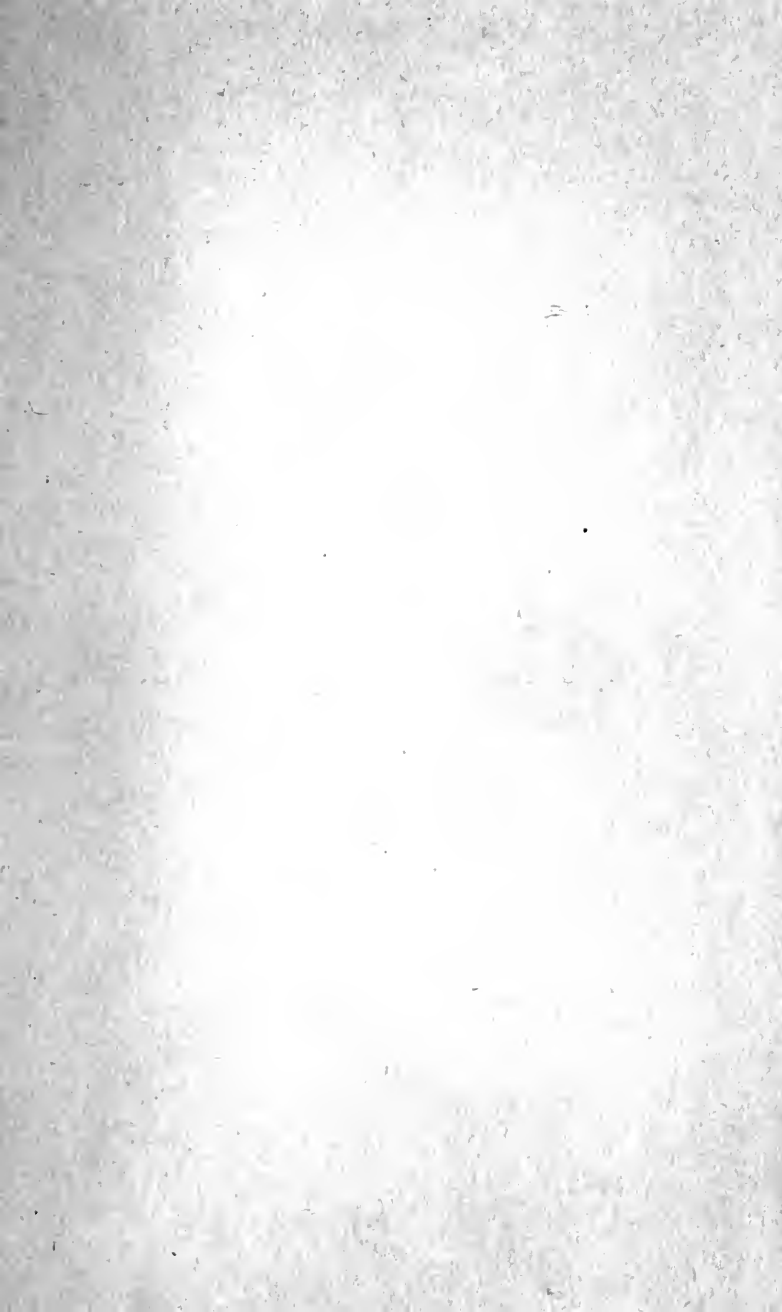
"Middle page," said George. "Yes," he added, turning away again, "I'd have known it anywhere. It's—I mean, the necklace especially. It's so awfully life-like."

Bill found the middle page, and looked up and down the three columns of "To-night's Gossip." In several places little half-tone photographs had been inset, and with a sudden start he saw that one of them represented Osman Girling. He turned to the accompanying paragraph, but it seemed that he knew what was coming almost before his eyes had time to read it.

"Mr. Osman Girling," the diarist had written, "who is well-known as a patron of music and as a progressive force in modern financial circles, has always been fond of a good story. Here is one that he relates . . ."

Once again the Right-hand Man had chosen his master.

THE END



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